



WE ARE ALL PHILO- SOPHERS

A CHRISTIAN
INTRODUCTION TO
SEVEN FUNDAMENTAL
QUESTIONS

JOHN M. FRAME

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We Are All Philosophers: A Christian Introduction to Seven Fundamental Questions

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To Colin

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PREFACE

After I wrote *History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, it occurred to me that perhaps I could write another book on philosophy that would be a bit less burdensome to the average reader. That book would be organized topically, rather than historically, and it would be a lot shorter and simpler. It would be more suitable for beginning philosophy students (college and seminary level, even some high school), and it would help them to see more clearly the practicality of the questions philosophers ask. Really, what we call “philosophical questions” are questions that we all ask, in one way or another. This book would help readers from all backgrounds to think through those questions with some clarity and depth.

In previous books¹ I have emphasized the point that one should not attempt to do philosophy without biblical presuppositions. I still maintain that view, and this book will in that sense be a Christian book. I do not believe that philosophy can or should be religiously neutral. But in this book, that principle will be shown more than said, at least until the end. This is not primarily a book about apologetic methodology, and I will not be addressing professional apologists as I have done in the past. But I think the book’s argument will show that repressing the truth about God leads to intellectual chaos.

So my desired audience in this book is everybody. Philosophical questions are questions that we all ask, and hence the title: we are all philosophers.

I am dedicating the book to a brilliant young man named Colin, who from childhood has asked philosophical questions. When his homeschooling family moved to Orlando, Colin’s father told him that he could meet a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary named Dr. Frame who could address his questions. The first question Colin asked me was, “What is the basic composition of the universe?” I tried to answer him, but badly fumbled the ball. In this book, the first chapter attempts a better

answer to his question, though probably not one that he could have understood as a child. The other chapters attempt answers to questions Colin might have asked me if I had handled his first question more helpfully.

ABBREVIATIONS

AJCB	<i>Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief</i>
CVT	<i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i>
DCL	<i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i>
DG	<i>The Doctrine of God</i>
DKG	<i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i>
DWG	<i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i>
HWPT	<i>History of Western Philosophy and Theology</i>
NCG	<i>Nature's Case for God</i>
NOG	<i>No Other God</i>
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
ST	<i>Systematic Theology</i>
TTD	<i>Theology in Three Dimensions</i>
TOML	<i>Theology of My Life</i>
WCF	<i>Westminster Confession of Faith</i>
WLC	<i>Westminster Larger Catechism</i>
WSC	<i>Westminster Shorter Catechism</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

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WHAT IS EVERYTHING MADE OF?

One of the first things we want to know about our world is its ingredients. We are curious about what goes into a chocolate cake, what materials are used to build our houses, what chips animate our smartphones. At one level, we answer these questions by personal experience, and we expand that experience by asking questions of other people and consulting other sources. When we ask the question more technically—*How many milligrams of sodium are in this cookie?*—we turn to scientists for more expertise. Their perspective takes us to further dimensions of reality: everything is made of the elements of the periodic table, and those in turn are collections of subatomic particles of various kinds. A recent theory says that everything is ultimately made of vibrating strings. But in my unscientific way, I ask what the strings are made of, a question that I've never seen an answer to.

As we ask the question more and more abstractly, at some point it becomes philosophical. Many of the questions we today consider scientific, such as those about astronomy and biology, were once considered philosophical: the philosopher Aristotle did not consider it beyond his proper arena to write books about the heavenly bodies and the parts of animals. But today, the term *philosophy* is reserved for the most abstract questions there are. Although the range of the term *philosophy* today is different from its use in the ancient world, questions of a highly abstract level have been with us since the beginning of the discipline.

THALES' METAPHYSICAL WATER

The first Greek philosopher, Thales, is famous for saying “all is water.” The Greeks, who did not have our modern periodic table, acknowledged four

elements out of which they thought everything was made: earth, air, fire, and water. That simplified somewhat the question of what the world is made of: there were only four possibilities. We don't know the reasons for Thales' choice, but we can imagine him arguing with his colleagues and students that there is a huge amount of water in the oceans, lakes, and rivers, and that it even comes down from the sky. Thales probably didn't know how large was the percentage of water in the human body, but he may have made an observation about that, and about how difficult it is for us to survive without water.

But another philosopher, Anaximenes, thought that all was made of air; and he may well have replied to Thales that we can survive without water longer than we can survive without air. And look at the huge amount of air in the expanse around us.

But someone might have asked each of these men, How do you know that *everything* conforms to your thesis? Thales didn't have any way of judging how much water there was on the moon, planets, or stars. (We still debate that question.) And even if we could show that the earth and the heavenly bodies are all made of water, how can we be sure that that is the end of our quest? How can we be sure that water is truly an "element," that it is not in turn made up of other ingredients?

Anaximander, another Greek philosopher of roughly the same generation, was more modest than Thales (*it's all water*) and Anaximenes (*it's all air*). He argued that we really don't know what the whole universe is made of. He thought it best to say that the basic ingredient was *apeiron*—the indefinite. We don't know what it is, but everything else somehow comes out of it.

These philosophers asked the question of ingredients, what Aristotle called "material cause," at the most abstract level. They wanted to find a substance that made up everything, but was not itself made up of anything else. They were seeking, in other words, to define "being." Being, whatever it is, is the most fundamental reality there is. Everything is being. So if we are to gain a truly complete knowledge of the universe, it seems that we must be able to describe, even define, being itself. The earliest Greek thinkers believed that they could approach this issue materialistically, by considering the physical ingredients that pervade the universe. If everything

is truly water, as Thales believed, then being itself is water and water is being.

But another problem arises: Thales' being-water is not real water. It is what we might call “metaphysical water.”² Normally, when I wash my hands, I put water on them (with soap, as Mom always insisted) and then dry them off. My hands become wet with water, and then become dry, as I remove the water. But with Thales' water I am never dry. The soap is water too, and the towel, and the sunshine that warms my hands and evaporates the remaining moisture. Thales' metaphysical water is not distinct from anything else in the world. It doesn't have the familiar properties we associate with water; it doesn't have water's distinctions from other realities.

What is it, then? Thales' metaphysical water is simply being, nothing more or less. It is not really distinct from any other kind of being, because there is no other. The most that can be said for his thesis is that on Thales' view water is the best *description* of being—that being is more like water than it is like anything else, even granting the differences between metaphysical water and literal water. But as we have seen, that assertion is debatable.

This means that (at the abstract, philosophical level) the question of ingredients boils down to the question of being: What is this world, *really*? Here the philosopher seeks a God's eye view of the world, an ultimate answer to the question “What is being?” But clearly Thales didn't answer that question. His answer is that being is something like water—but also not literal water. As it turns out, for him water is a metaphor for the ultimate character of the world. But Thales was looking for an answer, not a metaphor.

ARISTOTLE'S BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

The great philosopher Aristotle is famous for distinguishing four “causes.” When he talked about “material cause,” he usually did it in his usual common-sense way. Statues are made of stone, tables out of wood, and cakes out of flour and other ingredients. But even he could not avoid raising

this question to an abstract, philosophical level: What is *everything* made of?

Like Plato, he distinguished between *form* and *matter*. At the common-sense level, the stone in the statue is its matter, its material cause. But then the sculptor shapes this stone into a new form, perhaps the form of Socrates. So the object is no longer just stone; it is a statue of Socrates. It is the form that makes the object what it is and dictates its purpose (its “formal” and “final” causes).³ But the matter is what the statue is made of.

Now the stone also has ingredients: chemicals of various kinds. At each level, matter is made of other matter. But at some point the analysis reaches bottom. Aristotle believed that underneath everything there was a “matter” common to everything in the universe. He called it “prime matter,” the matter standing underneath all other matter and underneath all form. Prime matter is the ultimate *bearer* of form. But to be *prime* matter, that matter could not itself have any form.

A problem occurs here: for Aristotle, we have seen, the form is what makes the object what it is. Without any form, then, the object isn’t anything. It is nothing. It doesn’t exist. But what about prime matter?

We are tempted to say that because prime matter is the ingredient of everything in the universe, it is the most pervasive sort of being. It is like Thales’ metaphysical water, the essence of everything else. But we should resist that temptation. Aristotle’s prime matter cannot be being at all, because it has no form. For Aristotle, only form confers being on something. Prime matter has no form, for it is what *bears* form; it is what lies beneath all form. Since it has no form, it is not being at all. It is nonbeing, nothingness.

The Greek philosophers had a passion to understand being in general. But to understand anything, you have to understand what it is contrasted with. You don’t understand blue if you have no idea of how blue is different from red. So you don’t understand being unless you understand how it is different from nonbeing. But Thales, Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers failed to describe any intelligible difference between being and nonbeing. Thales’ metaphysical water characterizes everything, so one cannot make a distinction between water and nonwater. The same is true of

Aristotle's prime matter. It characterizes everything equally, so that we cannot describe it as being or as nonbeing. On the one hand, prime matter is what everything is made of, the most pervasive kind of being. On the other hand, it is not being at all, but nonbeing. But if you can't distinguish being from nonbeing, you have made no philosophical progress. Indeed, we are up against a brick wall: it seems that being is made of nonbeing, and vice versa, so that "being" and "nonbeing" are both meaningless expressions.

Parmenides bit the bullet. He promoted the idea of a universe that consisted entirely of being, with no nonbeing at all. He eliminated from his system anything that he thought involved nonbeing: change, generation, destruction, plurality. It seemed obvious: being is, and nonbeing is not. But what is being, in a universe where it cannot be contrasted with nonbeing? And if there is no nonbeing, what is meant by saying that there is "no" change, "no" generation, "no" destruction, and "no" plurality?

So though the Greeks sought mightily to understand and distinguish being and nonbeing, they ended up making them virtually equivalent, and therefore mutually destructive. That is, of course, philosophical suicide.

ATOMISMS

Another method among the Greek philosophers to find the ultimate ingredients of the world was to chop the world down into its smallest pieces. The atomists thought that when they discovered the tiniest constituents of the world, then they would know the ultimate nature of the world and of being. So Democritus, Epicurus, and others postulated that the world consisted of tiny, material entities. These were called "atoms," which means "unchoppables." Since they cannot be further chopped, they must be the ultimate constituents of the world. Everything else in the world can be traced to the material properties and the motions of these entities.

On Democritus' view, these atoms move through space in a single direction. But Epicurus pointed out that if they are all moving in parallel lines they will never meet. But they must meet, if they are to bump into one another and thus create larger objects. So Epicurus speculated that atoms occasionally "swerved" from their usual parallel path. The swerve is entirely unpredictable,⁴ irrational in effect; but it accounts for the world we

live in. This amounts to concluding one's philosophical quest by saying the world "just is."

Nobody has ever actually seen an atom. Atoms are just our imagined image of what the world would look like all chopped up. Nobody has ever seen an atom swerve, either. That event is just a metaphor for what we imagine all events to consist of. So as Thales' water was a metaphor for being, so Epicurus' atoms (plus their swerve) are a metaphor for describing what happens.⁵

MINDLIKE ENTITIES

But atomism is not dead. G. W. Leibniz was part of the rationalist philosophical movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he confronted a problem similar to that of Thales and Aristotle.⁶ Leibniz, like the Greeks, tried to find the ultimate constituents of reality, but the material causes were elusive, as they were for the Greeks. Philosopher John Locke had said that material substances were impossible to know with any precision: they were "something, I know not what." Following him, philosopher George Berkeley said that matter does not exist. But if we cannot know material substances, how is any kind of knowledge possible?

Leibniz reasoned that if we follow Democritus' example and try to chop reality into the smallest pieces we can, we will arrive at the ultimate constituents of the world. But those constituents will not be matter at all. Matter by the seventeenth-century definition is "extension," and anything extended can be chopped into smaller pieces. But Leibniz agreed with Democritus that this chopping cannot go on forever; eventually there must be a smallest piece.⁷ And if that piece cannot be chopped into something smaller, then what do we call it?

Well, the seventeenth century thinkers had something in common with the Greeks: they had limited the possible answers to the question of the ultimate constituents of the world. For the Greeks there were four: earth, air, fire, and water. For the seventeenth century thinkers, there were two: matter and mind. That made Leibniz's question easier to answer. The smallest piece cannot be further chopped; so it cannot be extended, so it cannot be matter. What must it be? Mind, of course.

So Leibniz developed the theory that the world is made of tiny minds, which he called “monads.” Everything is full of minds: not only human beings, but every part of every human being. Animals, plants, even inanimate objects were full of minds—some rudimentary, to be sure, but minds nonetheless. So Leibniz is a “panpsychist”: he believes that everything is mind. In this panpsychism, Leibniz has been followed by twentieth-century process philosophers like A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne.

But these little minds are something like Thales’ metaphysical water. They are not real minds. Real minds engage in reasoning; they communicate with other minds; they develop knowledge, language, and skills. Real minds are each dependent on other minds. A mind learns from others and grows in its knowledge. But it is therefore a changing being. Leibniz could not accept a group of changing beings as metaphysically primary. The whole reason for locating the “ultimate constituents of the universe” was to *explain* change; so these ultimate constituents could not themselves be changing. If they change, they are not ultimate; but rather they are explained by other beings within them, beings that cause the change.

Leibniz’s mindlike entities depend on a minimal concept of mind, a concept in which, despite all their mindfulness, they can do nothing. A monad has no communication with other monads and cannot affect other monads. What it thinks, it thinks because God implants thoughts into it. But then God is the ultimate cause, not the collection of monads.

That is to say that as Thales’ water was essentially a metaphor for the world that we experience, so Leibniz’s monads are a metaphor. He tells us to think about our world as if it were itself a society of thinking beings. But it is impossible that such a metaphor could be literally true.

ATOMISM AND MODERN THOUGHT

Many forms of modern thought continue the atomistic quest for the ultimate constituents of the universe. I mentioned earlier the panpsychism of process philosophy. There was also, early in the twentieth century, the “logical atomism” of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These thinkers, like many in the twentieth century, were persuaded that the remedy for

philosophy's lack of progress was closer attention to language. Lack of clarity, misunderstanding—this was the barrier to philosophical knowledge. They were also persuaded that, as Wittgenstein put it, “the limits of my language are the limits of my world.” What is the world? It is what can be expressed in language. So, they thought, we can understand the nature of the world by understanding the nature of language.

This generation of philosophers believed, with Wittgenstein, that the world is the totality of facts, not things. A thing is an object, like a book, a jar of water, or an atom. A fact is a state of affairs, like “there is a book on the table.” In language, things are represented by nouns, facts by clauses and sentences. So when these philosophers looked for “ultimate constituents,” they were looking for ultimate facts, not ultimate things. That marked a change from previous philosophers. In some contexts, this distinction is important, but I will not discuss it further here, except to explain the shift of interest in the constituent question: from trying to find ultimate *things* to trying to find ultimate *facts*.

So if we are looking for the ultimate constituents of the world, the ultimate facts (as they said, the “atomic facts”) that constitute the larger facts of our experience, we must ask what are the ultimate statements (“atomic statements”) that can be made by a speaker of language. For Russell and Wittgenstein, these atomic statements were simple reports of basic sense experience, like “red, now.” They assumed, with the empiricist tradition, that human knowledge is built up out of such basic sense experiences. So they thought they had discovered atomic facts, as Democritus thought he had discovered atomic particles.

But this is another case of metaphysical water. “Red” means nothing in isolation. In fact, we understand “red,” not by momentary sensations, but through a lifetime of identifying colors as they are distinguished in our language and culture (different cultures draw lines differently within the same color spectrum). Thales’ “water” was a metaphor for all the richness of our experience. So the logical atomists’ “red” is not some basic ingredient of experience from which all knowledge of redness is derived; instead, it presupposes knowledge already obtained. The logical atom is not the foundation of all knowledge; rather, we cannot even talk about the logical atom unless we have obtained knowledge from other sources. What

Russell's theory tells us to do is to think of experience under the metaphor of a collection of bits and pieces. But why should we think of it that way instead of thinking about it as mind, or as water?

The atomistic quest continues in modern science, in its search for smaller and smaller subatomic particles. But I ask again, what are the vibrating superstrings made of? What would happen if (with advanced instruments) I tried to chop one of them in two? In any case, is it likely that modern science has succeeded in doing what philosophical atomists have failed to do, namely to find the ultimate particle, the ultimate constituent of reality? And is it likely that those who claim to have found that particle have found anything but a metaphor to express the variegated reality of our general experience?

Modern science also confronts the mysteries of the subatomic world: the anomalous behavior of photons aimed at slots in a barrier; the strange linkage between one particle and another over distance; the apparently random behavior of particles suggested by some forms of quantum mechanics; the daunting prospect that most of the matter and energy in the world is "dark" to scientific investigation. As the scientific operationalists suggested, is it possible that some of the particles are better understood as metaphors for the "pointer readings" read in laboratory experiments? Indeed, is it possible that the universe is not a collection of ultimate pieces at all and that therefore we will never be able to discover the pieces?

HOLISM

As we have seen, the ultimate search for a basic ingredient has often failed, because the proposed ingredient is unintelligible except as a metaphor for the whole universe as we experience it. Nobody has ever seen an atom, or a monad, or a superstring. If we affirm them, we affirm them because these items suggestively reflect parts of our general knowledge. It is that general knowledge that is more fundamental. So to say that all is water is plausible only if it means something like "the universe is waterlike."

So some philosophers gave up the search for a particle. These acknowledged that no tiny particle, even if mindlike, can account for the richness of the world we inhabit. Particles do not account for the rest of the

world; they reflect it. The world is what the world is. We may think of that world under various metaphors, and some of those are illuminating or inspiring. But none is literally true. If there are little particles, they only partially explain the world. A particle is necessarily a part, a part of something much bigger. To understand the world, say these philosophers, we need much more than the knowledge of particles.

So there are yet other philosophical proposals that aim for a more comprehensive knowledge of the universe. Some non-atomist philosophers tell us that it is more illuminating to think of the world as a whole, in which everything is connected to everything else. Parmenides, Spinoza, and Hegel, for example, have told us that you really cannot fully understand anything (least of all a particle) until you understand its relations to other things, and eventually to the whole of reality. So the question “What is the world made of?” is unanswerable, or it is answered only by a comprehensive knowledge of the whole. As we saw earlier, Thales’ “water” was, in the end, only a metaphor for the whole. So perhaps the problems we noted among those who searched for particles can be solved through holism.

But holism contains problems similar to those of atomism. Unless considerably modified, what holism says is that we cannot know anything without knowing everything. The only true knowledge, then, is God’s own knowledge of the world. And if we claim true knowledge, we are claiming to be God. That seems the height of arrogance.

Usually, holist philosophers don’t make that arrogant claim explicitly. They recognize that we must think about the world with finite, fallible minds. But they do believe that our knowledge is deeply flawed if it is not as exhaustive as God’s knowledge. And then when we think of the “whole” as an ideal of knowledge, that whole must be defined by reference to the things we know more directly—the constituents of the whole. So it works both ways. We cannot know the parts (or particles) without knowing the whole, and we cannot know the whole without knowing the parts. When we try to know a part or particle as a key to the whole, or to know the whole as a key to the parts, we fail.

You can learn a lot about your smartphone by opening it up and spreading all the little parts out on a table. But you can’t understand what

any of the little parts is for unless you can see what the part does in the whole phone. So you can't understand the parts without the whole, and you can't understand the whole without the parts.

Holists usually present themselves as rationalists, as advocates for the power of reason. But they also believe that since we do not have a godlike knowledge of the world, we do not know it at all. That is skepticism.

Our conclusion should be that exhaustive knowledge of the world is something impossible for man. It is not just that our IQs are too low or our science insufficiently advanced. It is rather that the further we get in this quest, the more it defeats its purpose. When we make some progress in knowing the particles of which the world is made, we discover that we cannot understand those particles without understanding the whole. When we make progress in understanding the world as a whole, we discover that we cannot understand the whole without understanding its parts. The parts are not an infallible key to the whole, or vice versa. Trying to find a part without the whole, or a whole without the parts, are doomed philosophical strategies.

PANTHEISM

But there is still another step that some philosophers take. For Spinoza and Hegel, to know the whole is to know God, for God is the whole, and the whole is God. This is called *pantheism* ("all things are God"), and it is similar to the *panentheism* ("all things are *in* God") of modern process philosophy. These thinkers are right to say that the philosophical quest is a search for God; and for many philosophers it is a quest for divine knowledge: exhaustive, comprehensive, perfect, infallible knowledge.

This would be a fruitful procedure if we could presuppose that God actually exists and that he can tell us what the truth is. But too often the god of pantheism is nothing more than metaphysical water. To say that God is the world is to say that "all is God," just as Thales said "all is water." But just as Thales' water wasn't real water, Spinoza's God is not really God. In these systems, "God" is a fetching metaphor, a way of thinking about finite reality. Some people derive a romantic ecstasy from looking at a vivid landscape and regarding it as "divine." But what is this divinity? He, or it, is

the world, just as Thales' water is the world. So at most, as in the case of Thales, God becomes a suggestive metaphor, a way of talking about things that in themselves give no evidence of being divine.

THE REAL GOD

The Bible presents an alternative to atomistic and holistic views, an alternative neglected in the history of non-Christian philosophy. God really exists, but he is not the world, and the world is not him. He is personal, not an impersonal being as in Aristotle, Spinoza, and Hegel. He is the creator; the world is his creation. To worship the natural world is not to worship God; it is to worship the creation in the Creator's place (Romans 1:25),⁸ which is the biblical definition of idolatry.

We cannot understand the world exhaustively; only God has such knowledge. We cannot gain God's knowledge by ferreting out the tiniest particles we can find, or by speculating about what the whole must be. God has made the world so that each of these quests, atomism and holism, will end in failure—or, as it appears to faith, in mystery. That is to say, God has made the world so that if we want to understand the world, we must turn to him.

God in his wisdom cuts the Gordian knot of merely human philosophy. Or, perhaps, he ties together what no merely human system of thought has been able to reconcile. He is one God in three persons, a Trinity or Triunity. He has made the world to resemble himself: one and many. The particles are the many; but they are joined in a oneness and are inseparable from it and unknowable apart from it. And we cannot know the oneness without knowing the particles that make it up.

That is to say that only God knows exhaustively and comprehensively what the parts of the universe are and how they are connected to the whole. And if we want to know what the world is like, we must come humbly before him. We can make modest judgments about, say, the composition of chocolate. God has graciously opened much of creation to us for our investigation. But we cannot know what Thales and Aristotle were trying to know, the ultimate constituents of the universe. Only God can know that.

When we try to understand the universe exhaustively by our own intellect, we are claiming to know as God knows. And that is idolatry.

The uniqueness of God's knowledge of the world is one way of approaching the doctrine of the Trinity. For as I noted, the world is one-and-many, because God has made it to resemble himself. He is the eternal one-and-many. The Trinity is sometimes considered an impractical, abstract doctrine, even by Christians who confess it. Why is it needed? This tour through the history of Western philosophy offers just one of many answers to that question. What mankind has been grasping after for centuries has been available all along in the Trinitarian (the many) monotheism (the one) of the Bible.

God does make knowledge available to human beings, but to gain knowledge we must begin by listening to him (Proverbs 1:7). We can come to know the world when our thinking is based on God's revelation, found in the creation, to be sure, but also in the Bible.⁹ Then we must know our limits. Our goal must be, not to gain a divine knowledge of reality, but to obtain a human knowledge sufficient to carry out whatever calling God has given each of us.

What, then, is the ultimate ingredient of the world? There is none. Each substance, including the whole, is what it is because of other substances. The whole and the parts are relative to one another, because God has chosen to make the world that way, to be like himself. Each ingredient is relative to all the rest, subject to precise definition only in the mind of God.

We cannot, therefore, know what the world is without knowing God. The best answer to the question, "What is the basic composition of the world?" is "It is God's creation, fit to serve the purpose of glorifying him."

GLOSSARY

- **Apeiron (Anaximander):** The indefinite stuff from which all reality came.
- **Atomic Facts (Russell, Wittgenstein):** The smallest constituents of the factual universe, referred to by **Atomic Sentences**.

- **Atomic Sentences (Russell, Wittgenstein)** or **Atomic Statements**: The smallest constituents of language, referring to **Atomic Facts**.
- **Atomism (Democritus, Epicurus)**: The view that the world is composed of indivisible material entities.
- **Atoms (Atomism)**: “Unchoppables,” the tiniest material constituents of the world.
- **Being**: What everything is. The fundamental subject of philosophical metaphysics.
- **Efficient Cause (Aristotle)**: The explanation of why something moves. Coordinate with **Material, Final, and Formal Causes**.
- **Facts (Russell, Wittgenstein)**: States of affairs, referred to by clauses and sentences rather than by nouns.
- **Final Cause (Aristotle)**: The goal that something pursues. Coordinate with **Material, Formal, and Efficient Causes**.
- **Form (Plato, Aristotle)**: The quality that makes something what it is. Contrasted with **Matter**.
- **Formal Cause (Aristotle)**: The form that makes something what it is. Coordinate with **Material, Final, and Efficient Causes**.
- **Holism (Parmenides, Spinoza, Hegel)**: The view that the truth is to be found only in the whole of reality, not in any part.
- **Logical Atomism**: The view of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein that the fact of the universe is made up of “atomic facts,” and propositional knowledge of “atomic propositions.”
- **Material Cause (Aristotle)**: What something is made of. Coordinate with **Formal, Final, and Efficient Causes**.
- **Matter**: Same as **Material Cause**. Contrasted with **Form**.
- **Metaphysical Water (Thales)**: Being itself, seen under the metaphor of water.
- **Metaphysics (also, Ontology)**: The study of being in general, the most fundamental nature of the universe.

- **Monads (Leibniz):** Mindlike entities, thought to be the ultimate constituents of reality.
- **Panentheism:** The view that everything is in God, that the world is a constituent of God's being.
- **Panpsychism (Leibniz, Process Philosophy):** The view that everything is mind.
- **Pantheism:** The view that all is God and God is all.
- **Philosophy:** Exposition and defense of a worldview, from a highly abstract viewpoint.
- **Prime Matter:** The **Matter** that lies beneath all reality. Unlike other matter, it has no **Form**.
- **Rationalism:** Belief that human reason (as opposed to sense experience) is the foundation of knowledge.
- **Swerve (Epicurus):** The random movement of atoms veering from a straight trajectory. For Epicurus, this accounts for the formation of objects and for human free will.
- **Things (Russell, Wittgenstein):** Objects, referred to by nouns and pronouns, rather than by clauses and sentences. Contrasted with **Facts**.
- **Vibrating Strings:** The smallest entities in the universe, according to a modern theory.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Distinguish “metaphysical water” from “real water.” Explain Thales’ proposal in these terms.
2. “Indeed, we are up against a brick wall: it seems that being is made of nonbeing, and vice versa, so that ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’ are both meaningless expressions.” Why is Aristotle backed up into this wall?

3. “Though the Greeks sought mightily to understand and distinguish being and nonbeing, they ended up making them virtually equivalent, and therefore mutually destructive.” Explain and evaluate.
4. Frame thinks that unlike other sciences, philosophy does not make real progress from one generation to another. Why does he think this is true? Evaluate this thesis.
5. Why would someone think that it is possible to understand the world by understanding language? Evaluate this procedure.
6. “The logical atom is not the foundation of all knowledge; rather, we cannot even talk about the logical atom unless we have obtained knowledge from other sources.” Explain and evaluate.
7. “Indeed, is it possible that the universe is not a collection of ultimate pieces at all and that therefore we will never be able to discover the pieces?” What data suggest this possibility? Evaluate.
8. “And if we claim true knowledge, we are claiming to be God.” Who says this? What are their reasons? Reply to this position. Why does Frame say that holism devolves into skepticism?
9. How does Frame answer the question, “What is the basic composition of the world?” Explain and evaluate that answer.

2

DO I HAVE FREE WILL?

Philosophers explore not only the natural world, but also the nature of human persons. So philosophy includes anthropology as well as metaphysics. One philosophical question people often ask about themselves is this: *Am I free, or am I forced to do what I do?* This is the question of free will, free choice, free agency, or simply freedom.

Obviously we are not *always* free. The term “free” contrasts some of our experiences with others. If we are locked in a room, that limits our freedom to go elsewhere. Once someone unlocks the door, we gain freedom we didn’t have before. If we are bound with chains, someone is restraining us so that we cannot go to certain places or do certain things. But when the chains fall off, we are free. Freedom, then, always involves (1) a human activity, and (2) an actual or potential barrier to that activity. In general, freedom is *being able to do what you want to do*, with no barrier that keeps you from doing it.

The barrier may be chains or a locked door. It may be a physical disability. It may also be a law, moral or civil. If there is a civil law and we seek to get it changed, we are seeking political freedom. If there is a moral law and we seek to violate it, we are seeking a kind of freedom that is best unsought.

So far, I have described freedom in a common-sense way. But philosophers typically want to go beyond common sense, as we saw in the previous chapter. They pose questions in a highly abstract way. Ordinary people ask the ingredients of a cake or the materials in the foundation of a building; philosophers ask about the ingredients of the whole universe. Philosophical analysis of human freedom is similar. Common sense says I am free if I am not locked in a room, or if I am not bound by chains. Philosophical freedom, or “libertarianism,” is something else.

LIBERTARIANISM

Libertarianism says that if there is any *cause* determining my action, my action is not free. So free actions are actions without any cause. On the libertarian view, causes are like chains, or like locks on doors. We cannot escape them, so they place us in bondage; they take away our freedom. If something *causes* me to enter a room, then, says the libertarian, I have not entered freely.

For example, according to common sense, if I raise my right arm because I desire to, I have raised it freely. But to a rigorous libertarian, doing what you desire to do is not enough to make you free. For our desires sometimes have causes beyond themselves. Perhaps I desired to raise my arm because of hypnosis, or because of an inner compulsion driving me to try to touch the sky. Such compulsion takes away my freedom. And the libertarian generalizes further: if my desire is caused in any way it cannot be free.

We sometimes say that our decisions are based on our “strongest desire.” If I want to eat beets, but I want to eat Brussels sprouts even more, then, faced with the choice, I will eat Brussels sprouts. But on that account, my desire for Brussels sprouts made it impossible for me to eat beets. And since one choice was closed off to me, my remaining choice, eating Brussels sprouts, was determined, forced, constrained. So, says the libertarian, my choice to eat Brussels sprouts and not to eat beets was not free.

On the libertarian view, then, my choice is not free if it is determined by my strongest desire. The only way I can choose freely to eat Brussels sprouts is if, even after I have made that choice, it is still equally possible that I might eat beets. To generalize: choosing something because it is your strongest desire can never be a free act. The strength of the desire is constraining, causing, your choice. And on the libertarian view, *nothing* can constrain your choice. It must be *totally* free, free of any causal necessity.

On this view, a truly free choice is a choice without any causes whatever. If I raise my right arm while sitting in a classroom, and I do it to answer the teacher’s question, that motive forces me to raise my hand. In that case, I am caused to raise my arm, so I am not free; I am “determined.”

To libertarians, causes are like chains, or locks on doors: they force you to behave in a certain way, taking away your freedom.

We can understand this position up to a point. If my right arm goes up in the air because someone else grabs it and forces it into that position, then normally I would not say that I have moved it freely, even if raising it is what I wanted to do. Examples like this one incline us to think that causation somehow smothers freedom. But libertarianism takes this principle further. For a libertarian, *any* causation smothers freedom, even causation by my own desires.

But if there are no constraints at all to a free action, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that our free movements are uncaused and unexplained. They are events of pure chance or randomness.

The idea that some events in the world are the result of pure chance is a philosophical position at a high level of abstraction. Philosophers like Spinoza and Marx have argued that reality is *deterministic*—that is, that there is no such thing as chance, that every event has a cause, and therefore that everything that happens is the result of a cause-effect sequence. Other philosophers, like Epicurus (whose atomism we noticed in the previous chapter), have argued that there is some element of chance in the world.

Epicurus argued that the movement of atoms in space cannot be in parallel lines: for if atoms all move in parallel lines (if they all moved downward, for example), then they would never bump into one another. But bumping is important, because for Epicurus that is the mechanism by which objects larger than atoms come into existence. Larger objects are clumps of atoms that have collided at some point in their cosmic journey. So Epicurus believed that some atoms “swerve” from a straight path. Since atoms are not intelligent beings, and they are not intelligently directed, their swerve is purely by chance; it is utterly random. Epicurus also believed that the swerve accounts for moral responsibility, for he held the libertarian view that moral decisions are not free if they are constrained in any way. He believed that there must be an element of randomness in our moral decisions: they may not be determined or caused.

This concept of free will has attracted favorable attention from other thinkers. Aristotle’s “matter” is an element of randomness in the universe as

he understood it. Theologians like Duns Scotus, Arminius, and Molina, and philosophers like Immanuel Kant, C. A. Campbell, H. D. Lewis, Peter Van Inwagen, and Alvin Plantinga have defended libertarianism.

EVALUATING LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL

But the question is whether a free action actually needs to be uncaused. On a libertarian basis, I cannot know whether I am free (say in raising my arm in class) unless I'm sure that my movement had no cause. Let's say I raise my arm and you ask me whether I raised it freely. If I am a libertarian, my answer will have to be "I don't know." I do know that nobody has grabbed my arm and pushed it up. I know that my arm went up because I wanted it to. But I don't know if my movement has a more subtle cause. Perhaps my desire to move it has been strong enough to cause the action. On a common-sense view, that fact implies that my action is free. But on a libertarian view, such a desire implies that the action was not free, for the desire itself has constrained or forced me to do what I did. So on the libertarian view I would have to prove that my movement has no cause at all in order to prove that it is free. And many have taught us that it is impossible to prove a negative.

But that is not what we mean by "free." A free action does not have to be without a cause. Indeed, an action without a cause would be an anomaly, a weird event, something that just happens, without our wanting it to. If my arm keeps popping up in the air, whether I want it to or not, that is not a free movement; it is just odd. In fact such randomness is an impediment to freedom. For if my arm keeps popping up in the air for no reason, that is a condition I have no control over. It is a pathology, an involuntary spasm, not a paradigm of free choice.

Sometimes causality does impair freedom, as when someone grabs my arm and pushes it around. But it is simply not true that *all* causality impairs freedom. People who say it does so make mistakes similar to those we saw in the last chapter. They take a philosophical principle and push it to an abstract level where it is a barrier to knowledge rather than a help. Thales noted that some things are made of other things, and then he advanced the idea that one thing, water, makes up everything else. But there is no reason

to think that there is one ingredient that makes up all of reality. Similarly there is no reason to believe that any causality at all is a barrier to freedom.

As with the topics discussed in chapter one, this topic has religious implications. First, we saw in the previous chapter that there is a kind of arrogance in philosophers who imagine that with their autonomous intellect they can determine the precise ingredients in all of reality. The present case is similar. In the free will discussion, some philosophers, the libertarians, claim the ability to detect the precise elements that go into free choice. The common sense concept, that I am able to do what I want to do, is not enough for them. Rather, they think that with philosophical rationality alone they can prove that there is absolutely no causality in any free choice. As Thales thought that all reality is water, so libertarians say that all free choice is uncaused.

Further, the Bible explicitly contradicts libertarianism. It does not simply deny that free choices are uncaused; it specifies some of the causes that explain free choice. For example, Jesus said,

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. (Matthew 15:19)

According to this saying, evil actions are caused by the evil nature of the person's heart. Certainly Jesus regards them as free, because the people are responsible for their actions. Contrary to libertarianism, then, they are free, though caused. Even more difficult for libertarianism are passages that describe God hardening the hearts of wicked persons, as in Romans 9:17–18 where he hardens the heart of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was certainly responsible for his sin, but God *caused* that sin.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

So a biblical answer to the question, “Do I have free will?” leads us to another major philosophical problem which touches on theology: the problem of evil. How could God cause people to sin, when he is the very definition of goodness and holiness? Many have justified their unbelief by saying that God should have made a world without evil. Since God has created a world with evil as an ingredient, says the accuser, he must himself

be evil, or perhaps he is not God at all. But evil is something very mysterious, and our minds are not sufficient to account for it on our own. We should certainly listen to what God himself has to say on this question.

The Apostle Paul heard the same accusations, and he replies as follows:

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:14–24)

Paul says here (1) that God, because he is God, has the right to do as he wishes with the world he has made (vv. 14–21), (2) that God nevertheless hates evil and had to have much patience in order to tolerate it for a time (v. 22), and (3) that God makes the evils work for good to those he calls (v. 23, cf. 8:28). Those principles do not exhaustively explain the mystery of evil, but they provide an entrance to the Christian way of understanding it, the way we *ought* to understand it.

On this understanding, God does indeed cause sin and evil, though he rightly holds Satan and humans responsible for their wicked acts. This is certainly mysterious, and Christians should not apologize for the mystery. If God were not mysterious to us, he would not be God.

To say that God causes sin troubles many people, but Scripture says this often, and we need to take account of that. God does bring about evil events. Consider the following:

And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. (Exodus 4:21)

But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. (Exodus 7:3–4a)

But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day. (Deuteronomy 2:30)

[God] turned [the Egyptians’] hearts to hate his people, to deal craftily with his servants. (Psalm 105:25)

This list could be expanded to include many other passages. See Exodus 7:13; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8. Note the sustained emphasis on God’s agency. Many of these deal with God hardening Pharaoh’s heart. It is also true that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15), but in the narrative God’s hardening of him is clearly prior and receives greater emphasis. Hardening one’s heart is a sin (Psalm 95:7–8), but in Pharaoh’s case God made it happen, for his own specific purpose. Having discussed God’s dealings with Pharaoh, Paul summarizes,

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wishes to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. (Romans 9:18)

And despite all this emphasis on God’s causation, it is plain that Pharaoh, not God, is to blame for his wicked actions.

Paul understands evil this way, rather than the way of God’s accusers, because he has received Jesus’ saving grace into his heart. And with that grace, God has given Paul a new mind, a mind that understands the world in

a very different way from the philosophers, the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16).

So Christ is the savior of philosophy, because he is our savior from sin. He saves us from sinful thoughts and philosophies (Colossians 2:8), as well as from murder and stealing.

CONCLUSION

Our excursion into the question of free will has led into the even more difficult question of the problem of evil. Philosophers and theologians have often said that God does not cause evil, but that evil is explained instead by human libertarian freedom. But to say that is to say that evil came into the world by chance. And it is to give chance a power greater than God, for on this view God could not prevent evil from entering the world by chance.

But I have suggested that we bite the bullet and recognize that God does bring evil into the world for his good purposes. And we should think of that the way the apostle Paul does in Romans 9. Then for all the reasons I have cited we should reject the libertarian concept of freedom and revert to the common sense concept: whether or not my action has a cause, I am free if I am acting the way I want to act.

So the answer to the question in the title of this chapter is: yes, we do have free will, in the common-sense meaning of “free will.” That means that in many cases we can do what we want to do.

That also means that when we act freely in this sense we are morally responsible for what we do.

But no, we do not have free will in the libertarian sense. Our free acts do have causes: causes within us and causes beyond us. Our choices are caused by our desires, by the loves of our hearts, and by God’s sovereign decision. And these causes, the Bible teaches, take nothing away from our moral responsibility.

GLOSSARY

- **Anthropology:** The study of human nature.

- **Cause:** What makes something happen.
- **Chance:** An event that is completely undetermined or uncaused.
- **Determinism:** The view that every event has a cause.
- **Libertarianism:** The view that free actions have no determining cause.
- **Problem of Evil:** The fact that though he is good and holy God brings about sin and evil.
- **Swerve (Epicurus):** The view that atoms alter the course of their motion by chance, so they will collide and form larger objects. Epicurus thought that the swerve accounted for moral freedom and therefore for moral responsibility.
- **The Mind of Christ:** Thinking the way Jesus thinks.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the two elements of freedom, according to Frame? Evaluate. Distinguish physical freedom, political freedom, and moral freedom.
2. Why do libertarians think that free actions must be uncaused? Evaluate this view.
3. When I choose to do something according to my strongest desire, is it possible for my choice to be free? Discuss.
4. On a libertarian basis, how can I know that I have acted freely?
5. Frame says that randomness is an impediment to freedom. Explain and evaluate.
6. Does the Bible support libertarianism? Cite some relevant passages.
7. How does the Bible respond to the problem of evil? What is your response?
8. “Christ is the savior of philosophy.” How can this be? Isn’t Christ concerned with moral and spiritual matters, rather than intellectual

disciplines like philosophy? Explain.

3

CAN I KNOW THE WORLD?

Besides metaphysics and philosophical anthropology, philosophy explores knowledge, or epistemology. As with the previous topics, philosophy asks epistemological questions at a very abstract level. In ordinary life, we often ask specific questions about knowledge: How can I know how to pay my taxes? How do I know how much fertilizer to put on my lawn? How do I know the value of x in this algebraic equation? How can I get to know my neighbor? But philosophers ask, How can I know anything at all? Note the recurring pattern: philosophy explores metaphysical ingredients, abstract freedom, knowledge in general. It assumes that beyond all the specifics there is “knowledge in general”—something common to all knowledge that validates all specific forms of knowledge. Philosophers try to identify that factor by asking, “How can I know anything at all?”

JUSTIFIED, TRUE BELIEF

For a long time in the West, philosophers defined knowledge as “justified, true belief.” It seemed that this phrase identified the factor that all knowledge had in common.

For us to have knowledge, we must first have a *belief*. If we are to know what color the sky is, we must first have a belief about it. But not every belief is knowledge. Sometimes we believe something and that something turns out to be false. If it is false, we don’t call it knowledge.

So knowledge must not only be a belief; that belief must be *true*. Of course, the concept of truth is problematic today, but so is the concept of belief. Most people, at any rate, think that to have knowledge is to have true beliefs.

But not every true belief is knowledge. Perhaps I believe that the Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Series in 1960. That is a true belief. But maybe my belief is on the basis of a wild guess, or a dream, or a powerful wish, rather than any reliable information. Maybe I think that since the Pirates are a wonderful team, they must have won the World Series every year. So, though I believe the Pirates won in 1960, I have no *right* to believe that. That is to say, I have no valid *reason* to believe that. I have no *justification*. Well, if my belief is based on a wild guess, even though it is true, we probably would be wrong to call it knowledge. Knowledge must be a *justified* true belief, not just a true belief.

So knowledge is justified, true belief. Or is it? Edmund Gettier, in 1963,¹⁰ argued that some beliefs are true and justified, but should not be called knowledge. Say that I believe the population of New York City is ten million and that belief is true. I believe it because I read it at a normally reliable website. But it turns out that at that point the site was unreliable; the entry was written by an unqualified editor who was fudging his data. So I had a true belief, which was justified (that is, I had a right to believe it), but the justification turned out to be inadequate.

Of course, Gettier's dissent provoked a major discussion among philosophers as to (1) whether this threefold definition of knowledge is adequate, and (2) what constitutes adequate justification for knowledge claims.

I think the threefold definition is a good one as far as it goes. But its key terms, *belief*, *true*, and *justified*, raise questions for further analysis.

For the moment, let us look closer at the term *justified*.

JUSTIFICATION

With this term, the definition leaps a philosophical barrier, the barrier between facts and norms, between “is” and “ought.” Facts are what “are”; norms are what “ought to be.” David Hume taught that you could not deduce a statement about oughts from a statement about facts. For example, “Beets are nutritious” does not imply that “We ought to eat beets.”

We usually think of knowledge as an accumulation of facts. But justifications of knowledge are “ought” statements, statements about what

we ought to believe. When I justify my belief about the Pittsburgh Pirates by referring to a website, I am assuming that I have an obligation to believe what the website says.

But how can I validate such an assumption? How do I know when I have an obligation to believe something? Obligations are not the sorts of things you can see or hear. They are not subject to what we usually call “scientific method.” That is Hume’s point. Science, insofar as it is accurate, tells us facts. But from those facts you cannot deduce norms, oughts, obligations.¹¹

But justifications of knowledge claims are indeed statements of obligation. So knowledge of facts is itself more than knowledge of facts. Knowledge of facts always contains knowledge of obligations. In the end, whatever I believe, I believe because I think I *ought* to believe it.

So, although factual knowledge does not *entail* knowledge of obligations, factual knowledge always *presupposes* obligations. One application of this principle is that science presupposes morality.

These reflections suggest that moral knowledge, ethical knowledge, is more fundamental than the kind of knowledge we get from our senses, our reasoning, and our scientific methods. For whenever we seek to verify beliefs from one of these sources, we must first verify that we have an ethical obligation, or at least ethical permission, to believe it.

This conclusion is troubling to many. For the usual assumption among secular philosophers is that the deliverances of our senses and reason are much more reliable than moral knowledge is. But that assumption is wrong. In fact the deliverances of our senses and reason are not reliable at all unless we have a reliable idea of what we are obligated to believe.

But where does our knowledge of obligation come from? Chapters 5 and 6 of this book will deal in more detail with moral knowledge. But for now let us recall Hume’s point, that moral knowledge cannot be deduced from factual knowledge, the deliverances of our senses and reason. It seems, rather, that we learn morality in mysterious ways. Often we can’t identify the process: that particular knowledge just seems to seep in.

Perhaps our basic moral knowledge is innate. But some of it comes to us through the counsel and examples of other people, such as parents,

teachers, coaches, employers, or writers. We accept these people as role models depending on the quality of their relationships to us. In particular, we respect people who appear to have *authority*, *power*, and *love*: (1) When we perceive someone has genuine *authority*, we respond with loyalty, a willingness to share that person's values and goals. (2) When we recognize a person's *power*, we emulate that person's values in order to achieve our own purposes in the world. (3) When we encounter a great *love*, that, perhaps more than anything else, moves us to admiration of the person and grateful acceptance of the person's values.

But we are often disappointed in commitments based only on human virtues. For one authority conflicts with another; one power with another; one love with another. But the Bible teaches that behind the authorities, powers, and loves that we recognize in human society, there is a being with absolute authority, power, and love, whose values can never be defeated.¹² Somehow, behind and beneath all the values that we pick up from our parents, teachers, philosophers, and political leaders, is the one they all point to, however fallibly.

The Bible assumes that we all know God and know his values. Romans 1:18–32, which I shall expound in the following chapter, tells us that God is revealed clearly in his creation, and that he reveals to us, not only that he exists, but the basic nature of our moral obligation: We *ought* to worship him, and him alone. And that fundamental obligation underlies all others.

So knowledge is a moral issue. When we claim to know something, we claim in effect that God *permits*, or even *obligates* us to believe it. We can indeed know the world; in fact, we *ought* to know the world. But we know the world because we know God.

GLOSSARY

- **Authority:** Right to be obeyed.
- **Edmund Gettier:** Questioned the traditional definition of knowledge by suggesting counterexamples.
- **Epistemology:** The theory of knowledge.
- **Facts:** States of affairs; what is the case.

- **Justification (of Knowledge):** What establishes a person's right to claim that their belief is knowledge.
- **Knowledge (traditional definition):** Justified, true belief.
- **Love:** Allegiance, benevolent action, and/or emotional affection.
- **Naturalistic Fallacy:** The attempt to deduce "ought" from "is," obligations from facts.
- **Norms:** Statements of what ought to be the case.
- **Obligations:** Requirements on human behavior following norms.
- **Ought:** A verb used in sentences claiming to represent a norm and to impose an obligation.
- **Power:** Ability to accomplish one's purposes.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did Hume think that obligations do not follow from facts? Give an example of an obligation that does *not* follow from an apparently related fact.
2. "In the end, whatever I believe, I believe because I think I *ought* to believe it." Does this observation contradict Hume? Explain and evaluate.
3. Frame says that "science presupposes morality." Explain and evaluate.
4. "It seems, rather, that we learn morality in mysterious ways." How did *you* learn your moral standards? Is that process sufficient justification for your moral convictions?
5. What do authority, power, and love have to do with the communication of ethical knowledge? What should we do when confronted with conflicting examples of these attributes?
6. "Knowledge is a moral issue." How does Frame argue this principle? Evaluate.

4

DOES GOD EXIST?

Some think that philosophy and religion are miles apart. Philosophers, to be sure, often have an antipathy toward religion. The first Greek philosophers, such as Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Parmenides led a revolution of thought—abandoning the Greek religion and seeking to understand the world by reason alone. Some, like Epicurus, acknowledged the existence of the Greek gods; but Epicurus believed that the gods were irrelevant to the serious work of philosophy. To him, one could learn more about the real workings of the world by studying atoms than by studying Zeus.

Yet the apostle Paul, when he visited Athens, the philosophical capital of the world, and spoke to Epicureans and Stoics, perceived that they were “very religious” (Acts 17:22) because the place was filled with images of deities. Sophisticated as they pretended to be, the philosophers provided no basis for society to resist its worship of idols.

And the philosophers found it hard to resist bringing gods of various kinds into their own systems. The Epicureans, again, grudgingly admitted the existence of the traditional gods. The Stoics taught a more sophisticated pantheism. Aristotle’s view was more broadly influential. He said that there must be an ultimate cause of motion, itself uncaused. That being he called the “First Mover”; and he sometimes used religious terminology, acknowledging this being as god. He did not think that the world was adequately explained by Thales’ water, or Anaximander’s *apeiron*, or by Democritus’ atoms, or by his own prime matter (see chapter 1). Something had to get the whole process going, and as Aquinas later said, everyone agrees that this is god.

But these gods are very far removed from the God of the Bible. The biblical God is not a material substance, like water or air. Nor is he to be identified with the world, like the Stoic Nature. And in many ways he is

unlike Aristotle's Prime Mover. Aristotle's god does not know the world, and he certainly cannot love it, for such a relationship would compromise his absoluteness. It would mean that God's knowledge was somehow dependent on the world process. So the First Mover does not answer prayer or atone for sin or save people from their sins and the consequences of their sins.

Nevertheless, we can see from these reflections that the problem of God's existence and nature is a properly philosophical problem. As we have seen, philosophy seeks a comprehensive description and explanation of the world, and that kind of knowledge seems like something only God could have. So philosophy seeks a path to God.

That path is not far from any of us. The apostle Paul, who preached to the Epicureans and Stoics, tells them that the true God has made the world in such a way that the people "should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being' " (Acts 17:27–28). God has revealed himself so clearly that people ought to see that idolatry is wrong: "We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29). In Romans 1:18–32 he says more:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

He says that indeed God is not far from us, but he is clearly revealed in the world he has made. This clear revelation leaves us with no excuse for idolatry. Idolatry is not based on an honest ignorance; it is what verse 18 calls "suppression" of the truth—a *willful* ignorance. We worship idols because we don't *want* to worship God. And that suppression in turn corrupts our moral behavior as well. The first consequence of willful unbelief, according to Paul, is idolatry itself, then sexual perversion, then every other kind of sin.

That puts philosophy, and all of us insofar as we are all philosophers, in a different light. Philosophy, as practiced by the Greeks and by many non-Christians over the centuries, is not the innocent wonder of a child trying to probe the wonderful mysteries of his world. Rather it is the guilt of Adam and Eve, trying to escape God's gaze after they have determined to violate his commands.

Had the philosophers actually wanted to find God, they would have found him nearby. Identifying God in the world is not difficult; it does not

require complex argumentation. God is “clearly perceived.” Many are overcome by his reality as they gaze at the heavens on a starry night, or as they contemplate the mighty swells of the ocean or the majesty of the mountains. Even looking at ourselves in a serious way brings us in touch with God, for we are his image:

What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Psalm 8:4–8)

The very vastness of it all refutes the possibility that any lesser being could account for the universe, or for the multiverses, if such there be. And the universe is vast, not only at the macro level, but also at the micro level, as we look at the tiny particles of tiny particles (recall chapter 1) without being able to find a tiniest.

And consider the paths of philosophic thought itself. We have seen that time and time again it raises issues that might have brought it face-to-face with God, but it has suppressed that truth in disbelief. I argued in chapter 1 that the search for an “ultimate constituent of the universe” leads nowhere, or, rather, that it leads to mystery. So, unless the unity of the universe (together with its diversity) exists in the Trinitarian mind of God, it exists nowhere, and philosophy dissolves into irrationality.¹³

In chapter 2, I concluded that if human choices have no ultimate cause, they are random and meaningless. That ultimate cause must be God, for only the biblical God serves as both an ultimate cause and a determiner of meaning and significance.

In chapter 3, I argued that human knowledge is impossible unless we also have a knowledge of our moral responsibilities. But moral responsibilities cannot be known by our senses and reason alone. They come only from the revelation of a personal agent who deserves our utmost loyalty, fear, and love. So knowledge presupposes a relationship to God.

In chapters 5–7, I will explore further the nature of moral knowledge and the good news that God is not only the source of our moral knowledge but is through Christ the Redeemer of our sins against that knowledge.

GLOSSARY

- **First Mover (Aristotle):** The ultimate cause of motion, himself/itself unmoved.
- **Idolatry:** Worship of a false god.
- **Suppression of the Truth:** Voluntary decision not to believe what is true.
- **Willful Ignorance:** Suppression of the truth, because of our preference for a lie.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How is Aristotle’s Prime Mover like, and unlike, the God of the Bible?
2. Aristotle thought that if God knew or loved the world, that would “compromise his absoluteness.” Why did Aristotle think this was the case?
3. “Philosophy seeks a path to God.” What is the evidence of this? What philosophic problems move the discipline toward God?
4. Describe the relationships in Romans 1 between (a) suppression of the truth, (b) idolatry, (c) sexual sin, and (d) other sin.
5. “Philosophy … is not the innocent wonder of a child trying to probe the wonderful mysteries of his world.” What is it then? Explain.

6. How is God “clearly perceived”? Describe some situations in which he is revealed.
7. Summarize the evidence of God’s existence from chapters [1–3](#) of this book.

5

HOW SHALL I LIVE?

Ethics is also part of philosophy. The first Greek philosophers, like Thales, were mainly interested in the material composition of the world. But with Heraclitus, and especially with Plato and Aristotle, people tried to learn from philosophers how to live.

We have seen how other parts of philosophy presuppose ethics. In chapter 3 I argued that knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of moral obligations: to know anything we must know what facts we are obligated to confess; and that obligation is a moral obligation. In Chapters 3 and 4, I argued that moral obligation itself presupposes God, for the author of moral obligation must be a personal being with a moral character.

In this chapter, I would like to look at moral obligation more deeply. Philosophers have typically offered one of three general theories of ethics, sometimes coordinating two of these theories (rarely three of them) together.

TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

In teleological ethics (a modern variant is utilitarianism), human behavior seeks to achieve a goal, a *telos*. The goal is usually (as in Aristotle) *happiness*. Some philosophers, like Epicurus, construe happiness as *pleasure* (hence, *hedonism*). But pleasure itself needs further definition. The Cyrenaics understood pleasure in what others consider a fairly crude sense: pleasant sensual feelings like those of tasty food or sexual pleasure. But Epicurus, and, even more, Aristotle, saw pleasure or happiness as something much more refined. These thinkers understood that sometimes you must bypass immediate pleasures for the sake of long-range ones—such as the pleasure of achieving philosophic enlightenment.

But then epistemological questions intervene. How can I know what state of mind is a worthy goal for me to pursue? Who is to say what pleasures are worth pursuing, and which should be deferred? And what of corporate ethics? What account should I take of other people, their pleasures, their happiness? And what if one pleasure conflicts with another (from vanilla vs. chocolate to career vs. childrearing)? What if it appears that I must sacrifice my own pleasure, even my life, for someone else?

Teleological ethics often boasts of being the simplest kind of ethics. Human beings pursue happiness almost without thinking about it. So teleological ethics basically tells them to keep on doing what they are doing. And teleological ethics seems to bypass the vexing questions we discussed in chapter 3 of how to relate “is” to “ought.” On a teleological basis, it seems, ethical questions are simple “is” questions, questions of fact: Does this course of action make me happier than others? If so, what are the means of achieving it?¹⁴

But in the difficult areas, where one pleasure seems to conflict with another, factual information is typically indecisive. And even as we pursue seemingly simple goals in life, questions arise as to whether these simple goals are goals we *ought* to pursue. As we have seen, we cannot deduce ethical “oughts” from judgments of fact. But judgments of fact seem to be the only subject matter of teleological ethics.

At best, teleological ethics takes the “ought” for granted, thinking everybody knows that we ought to pursue pleasure. It takes for granted that only happiness is good in itself. But many of us cannot assume that.

DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

So other philosophers have said that ethics is really about “oughts,” obligations, duties. *Deontological* comes from the Greek *deo*, which means “owe,” “ought,” or “must.”

Plato’s ethics are complex, but I think he was basically a deontologist, for he saw his “forms” as *criteria*, standards that the visible world needed to measure up to. Modern deontologism owes much to Immanuel Kant, for whom ethics is based on categorical imperatives—commands that we must obey unconditionally. Kant was an opponent of the teleological tradition.

For him, ethical imperatives typically contradict our self-interest, our judgments of what is pleasurable or useful.

But the problem in deontological ethics typically emerges when we try to state what our duties are. Kant thought they could be derived by a logical deduction from a few obvious axioms, such as a version of the Golden Rule. But other philosophers have questioned both these axioms and Kant's deductions from them.

EXISTENTIAL ETHICS

So many have given up on trying to identify authoritatively the categorical norms of ethics, and they have reverted to what most humans would prefer to do anyway—namely to do whatever they please. Or, to put it more philosophically, they follow their own subjectivity as their only ethical guide. They despise any claims that some person or principle has the right to tell us how to live.

Some existentialists, however, try to bring in other considerations. Jean-Paul Sartre says that we ought to live authentically, in such a way that we display our true selves with honesty. But where do these appeals to authenticity and honesty come from? Why do we have an obligation to be authentic, if subjectivity is our only guide? And what of those of us who are most authentic, most honestly themselves, when they are pretending to be someone else? Also, how do I know which of my desires is authentic when my desires conflict?

It seems that the existentialist cannot do without deontologism, without an appeal to norms that stand above us and define what our true selves ought to be. But the deontologists and the teleologists do such a poor job at defending their duties and their pleasures that their own ethics reduces to existential-subjectivism. And subjectivism boils down to badly disguised versions of deontologism and teleologism.

BIBLICAL THEISM

Why this confusion? Again, I have recourse to a very different worldview, the biblical theism of Scripture. According to the Bible, God orchestrates

the purposes of mankind, his own ethical commands, and human subjectivity to work together. We can ask, “What will bring the greatest happiness?” “What are the duties commanded by the highest authority?” and “What fits best with my inner subjectivity?” and arrive at the same place. In a biblical worldview, teleologism, deontologism, and existentialism converge. They provide us with three perspectives on ethics, three different emphases, and three ways of checking and balancing our initial judgments. But in the end, they view the same ethical principles, God’s revelation, from three different angles.

In a biblical teleologism, we seek the goal of God’s glory in all that we do (1 Corinthians 10:31). When we glorify God, we find happiness, even pleasure. So we seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33), knowing that all other blessings will be added unto us.

In a biblical deontologism, we obey God’s commands. These include the two Great Commandments, to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40), and the many applications of these commandments throughout Scripture. One particularly notable group of applications is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17, Deuteronomy 5:6–21).¹⁵

Worship the true God alone, placing nothing ahead of him.

Do not worship according to your own imagination and craftsmanship.

Refer to God with reverence.

Rest weekly on the Sabbath day.

Honor your parents and others in authority.

Do not murder; have a deep respect for human life.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not mislead others in order to hurt someone.

Do not even desire things that you are not permitted to have.

In a biblical existential ethic, we focus on our heart, as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. He taught there that if we truly want to keep the

sixth commandment, we must deal with the anger in our hearts (Matthew 5:21–26). And if we want to guard against adultery, our hearts must be purified of lust (Matthew 5:27–30).

In this biblical ethic, there is no tension between human happiness, normative principles, and subjective authenticity. That is because God is sovereign over all three areas: he governs history so that those who seek God's glory will eventually be blessed (despite ups and downs); he commands those principles that bring him glory; and he creates us so that we are made to live that way.¹⁶

Again, we see that secular philosophy goes around in circles. Unwilling to accept the revelation of the biblical God, it absolutizes goals, then principles, then subjective feelings, then back again, without finding any assurance about how to live. Certainly philosophers in each of the three major strains of thought above have found part of the truth, in that they have isolated the three factors that deserve consideration in our ethical quest. But those factors will always war for supremacy, until they find their consistency under a tri-personal God.

And, as we have seen, ethical consistency brings epistemological consistency (chapter 3) and consistency in our thinking about the metaphysical world (chapter 1) and our own nature (chapter 2). That all these studies find their unity in God reinforces the argument of chapter 4 that God exists, for if he does not, we cannot speak intelligibly of anything else.

GLOSSARY

- **Authentic Existence (Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism):** Living without masking your own true nature.
- **Categorical Imperatives (Immanuel Kant):** Ethical requirements that are unconditional.
- **Deontological Ethics:** Ethics in which our behavior is governed by norms, commands, or duties.
- **Empiricism:** The view that sense experience is the foundation of human knowledge.

- **Ethics:** The study of how we should live.
- **Existential Ethics:** The view that our own inclination is our most reliable ethical guide, and that in all our behavior we should externalize our subjective inclinations.
- **Great Commandments:** In Matthew 22:37–40, the commandments to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves.
- **Happiness:** Satisfaction with the affairs of one's life.
- **Hedonism:** An ethic focused on the achievement of pleasure.
- **Pleasure:** Synonym for happiness, usually (but not always) focused on the enjoyment of physical sensations.
- **Teleological Ethics:** Ethics based on achieving a goal for human life, usually happiness or pleasure.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Teleological ethics is sometimes considered the simplest form of ethics. But what kinds of problems often complicate its simplicity?
2. What is the main problem with deontological ethics?
3. What is the main problem with existential ethics?
4. How does biblical theism respond to teleologism, deontologism, and existentialism?
5. Describe how biblical teleologism, deontologism, and existentialism should govern our lives.
6. “If [God] does not [exist], we cannot speak intelligibly of anything else.” How does ethics presuppose belief in God’s existence?

6

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

In this chapter we continue our discussion of ethics. In chapter 5, I discussed ethics in terms of obligations. But often we discuss how to live from a somewhat different perspective, the perspective of rights. In general, obligations are what I owe to others. Rights are what others owe to me. So rights and obligations are reciprocal. If I have the right to food and drink, someone else has the obligation to supply those to me. If I have the right to education, someone else has the obligation to teach me. If my neighbor has the right to be respected, then I have the obligation to respect him.

The language of rights has played a large role in Western philosophical and political discourse. John Locke distinguished “life, liberty, and property” as central rights that all of us have by nature. The US Declaration of Independence quotes Locke, substituting “the pursuit of happiness” for Locke’s “property.” As we have seen, the rights of one presuppose obligations of someone else; so for Locke and for the American founders, government exists to ensure that these rights are enforced.

But it is not obvious to all what rights we have. There has been much debate in American political circles, for example, as to whether health care is a right or merely a privilege. The issue here of course is that if healthcare is a right, then somebody is obligated to provide it; and in the debate, the provider is usually the government.

In 1948, the United Nations proclaimed its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Most of the rights it enumerates are uncontroversial. But some have been rationally debated. Article 25, for example, states,

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services,

and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

The document continues, stating that we have rights to education (Article 26) and to enjoyment of the arts (Article 27).

The Declaration agrees as I have argued that the rights of one entail the obligations of someone else. The Foreword says, “The international community has a duty to uphold and defend these rights.” And Article 28 says,

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Evidently, the Declaration envisages a world order that imposes upon the nations governments that in turn supply to everyone healthcare, food, shelter, and so on. These rights impose huge expenses on society, and the writers of the Declaration probably thought that these expenses should be met by a socialist system.

Yet when socialism has been put into effect, as in the former Soviet Union and in modern states like Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea, it has endangered each nation’s prosperity, the freedoms of its people, and even the safety of other nations.

Perhaps some rights imperil other rights. It is possible that trying to secure rights to food, healthcare, education, and so on. can lead to the loss of social tranquility and personal liberty, which are arguably also rights. It is also possible that even if we grant that healthcare, for example, is a right, it can better be supplied by a free enterprise economy than by a socialist government.

But these issues are complex. As in most philosophical disputes, it is not clear how this one could ever be resolved. Each disputant presupposes his own values and worldview, and most of the time it appears that nobody is listening to anyone else.

A BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF RIGHTS

In previous chapters, we have seen that the Bible helps us resolve otherwise insoluble disputes. Hard as it is to imagine, I believe that resolution is possible also in the discussion of rights. The key is to recognize again the reciprocity of rights and obligations. The Bible doesn't say much about rights, but it says much about obligations. To formulate a biblical doctrine of rights, we only need to flip its doctrine of obligation so that we can see it from the other side, so to speak.

To cite examples: If we are obligated to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves, that is the same as to say that God has the *right* to exclusive worship, and our neighbor has the *right* to be loved as we love ourselves. If we have an obligation, and we do, to honor our father and mother, then our father and mother have the *right* to our honor. If we have an obligation to respect the lives of others, then others have a *right* that compels us to respect their lives.

So all of biblical law can be translated into a doctrine of rights.

But there is a danger here. When we speak the language of rights, we typically take the stance of protestors, making demands of others. If we don't receive the honor or the respect we deserve (or think we deserve), we complain and demonstrate. This is not always wrong. On one occasion when Roman officials were preparing the apostle Paul for a beating, Paul protested that he was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:22–29). He demanded his rights, in this case his immunity from such treatment. This demand for rights was not wrong. It was a legitimate protest, and it made it possible for Paul to carry out his calling from God with less pain.

In 1 Corinthians 9:4–6, Paul told the church that he had a right to food, drink, and marriage. (To put it differently, he is saying that the church should have supplied him with food and drink and should have been hospitable enough for him to take a wife with him on his missionary journeys.) Again, Paul was not wrong. He was an inspired apostle, and we can trust his account of his own rights. But this passage, unlike Acts 22:22–29, is not a typical declaration of rights. For in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul is mainly interested in making a broader point, namely that for the sake of his mission he *gave up* his rights. Though he had a right to share the church's food and drink, he gave up that right, electing to make money from

tentmaking and thereby to feed himself. And he chose not to take a wife with him, lest he burden the church.

Behind Paul, of course, stood Jesus. Jesus received treatment that no man should receive. He died a horrible death. Surely he had a right to better treatment; but he relinquished that right. And Peter says,

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:23)

Paul's behavior followed that of the Savior:

To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure. (1 Corinthians 4:11–12)

Although it is sometimes appropriate to protest, seeking our rights, the way of the cross calls believers, more typically, to forego their rights in the service of God and of others.

So we have a lot of work on our hands if we seek to formulate a biblical doctrine of rights. (1) The biblical doctrine of rights is as vast as the biblical doctrine of obligations; indeed, the one translates into the other. So our teaching on rights needs to be as broad, as far-reaching, and as deep as our more traditional teaching about ethics. (2) To make our biblical doctrine of rights credible, we must explore the question of when we should protest and when we should permit ourselves to “suffer wrong” and even “be defrauded” (1 Corinthians 6:7).¹⁷

Theologians and philosophers both tend to assume that the list of human rights, including the right to protest, is obvious. But that is not true. It certainly has not been obvious to all cultures throughout time. Why should what is obvious to modern Westerners be the standard by which those cultures are judged? As with other issues, the biblical revelation gives us the only hope of resolving questions about rights. But too often we are so eager to demand our rights that we do not take the trouble to be sure of what our rights actually are. And we don't take the trouble to consider when to claim our rights and when to relinquish them. But the first lesson, as we

saw in the previous chapter, is to learn how to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. That establishes rights for all, and also the principle that love often relinquishes even genuine rights.

GLOSSARY

- **Communism:** A political order in which the government owns all means of production and has authority over all areas of human life.
- **Rights:** What others have an obligation to supply to me.
- **Socialism:** A political order in which the government takes responsibility for human welfare from cradle to grave. See also **Communism**.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. “Rights and obligations are reciprocal.” Explain and evaluate.
2. Do we have rights to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness? Health care? Food? Clothing? Housing? Medical care? Security in adversity? Education? Enjoyment of the arts? Argue pro or con for each.
3. Frame says that socialist societies typically endanger a socialist “nation’s prosperity, the freedoms of its people, and even the safety of other nations.” What examples does he have in mind in making this statement? Evaluate.
4. How is the Bible helpful in discussions of rights?
5. Is it ever right to demand our rights? Mention some relevant biblical examples.
6. In what kinds of circumstances should we give up our rights? Give some examples.

HOW CAN I BE SAVED?

Discussions of salvation are somewhat uncommon in what is called philosophical literature, as opposed to theological. But philosophers have spent much effort trying to understand good and evil, and they have noted that evil corrupts persons and societies. They have had much less to say about how evil may be overcome, but some have made suggestions to this purpose. Given that the world is in many ways a bad place, philosophers must address the question of how to escape, or overcome, this evil. And a means of escaping or overcoming evil is called “salvation.”

Modern Western philosophy has not said much explicitly about salvation, but it has explored, using different vocabulary, ways of escaping and overcoming evil. Consider the mysticism of the medieval philosophers, Spinoza’s “intellectual love of God,” Hegel’s oneness with the Absolute, and Marx’s “withering away of the state.”

Buddhist philosophy has been especially preoccupied with the means of salvation from the evil world. There are “four noble truths” asserting the prevalence of suffering in the world, and a “noble eightfold path” for escaping that suffering. For Buddhists, salvation, escape, is, in the end, escape from being itself, into a form of nothingness, called Nirvana. Nirvana brings an end to the otherwise endless chain of reincarnations and rebirths after death, which to Buddhism is a curse, rather than a blessing, since it is a recycle into more and more different kinds of suffering.

In the West, something similar developed in philosophical Gnosticism and in its hostile cousin, Neoplatonism. But Neoplatonic thinkers sought to express their mysticism in Christian terms, so as to obscure the actual content of their teaching. In the twentieth century, some process philosophers accepted the doctrines of Buddhism itself and integrated that into their panentheistic metaphysics.

But Buddhism is a dead end. As the Greeks introduced incoherence into philosophy by mixing together being and nonbeing (chapter 1), so Buddhism in effect makes annihilation into a superior form of being, indeed, into human salvation. That promise simply is not credible.

Buddhism in effect shifts the blame from our own hearts to the metaphysics of the world, to being in general. And it pretends that if we renounce being and embrace nonbeing we will overcome the evil in ourselves. But the Buddhist nothingness, the Nirvana, if it is meaningful, is only another form of being. As being, it ought to be itself evil, a form of suffering. If it is really nonbeing, then as the Greeks believed it is an incoherent concept; for nonbeing has no meaning except by way of contrast with being.

Western philosophy too, in its meditation on good and evil (as in its metaphysics, epistemology, and theology), has painted itself into a corner. The world, including the human heart, is corrupted by evil. If God exists (see chapter 4) and if he cares about good and evil (chapters 5–6), and if he is the only one who enables us to distinguish between good and evil (chapter 5), then intentional evil is “sin,” offense against God. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that original sin is “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”¹⁸ Philosophers have always noted this obvious fact, but for the most part they have been unable or unwilling to show us the way out of this predicament, an alternative to the Buddhist way of nothingness.

BIBLICAL SALVATION

As in the discussions of the previous chapters, I must propose recourse to divine revelation. The mysteries of good and evil are quite beyond our philosophical wisdom, but a wise philosopher will recognize where he needs help.

In chapter 4, I drew our attention to Romans 1:18–32, where the apostle Paul tells us that God is clearly revealed together with his wrath against human sin. This is part of a longer argument. In Romans 1, Paul’s target is the Gentile, sometimes called the “Greek.” In chapter two, he turns on his

fellow Jews and says that they are no better than the Gentiles. Then in chapter three he generalizes his condemnation over the whole human race:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:9–20)

A powerful indictment. We resist this description of ourselves, but we need to attend to the “empirical verification” of original sin in our own hearts and behavior. If we are persuaded of that doctrine, then we will cry out for salvation—not a salvation from being, but from the evil we have seen in ourselves.

Paul does not hesitate to present the way out, the way of salvation:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21–26)

We cannot be saved from the evil of our hearts by the law, that is, by trying to be good and to avoid being bad (Romans 3:21). Our guilt is too great for that. Rather, for Paul, salvation comes from faith, from believing in Jesus (3:22). Jesus gives us salvation by grace, that is, as a gift and not a wage (3:24). He is able to do that because of “redemption” (3:24): he has shed his blood to receive the wrath of God (“propitiation,” 3:25) in our place. By this substitution, God righteously forgives past, present, and future sins (3:25–26).

In this way, God shows himself to be just, as well as the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). You see, God’s own justice has been challenged in this context. Satan has accused God of injustice in not condemning people who are guilty of sin. That raises the problem of evil, which I discussed in chapter 2. But we saw there that although God’s plan includes evil, God vindicates himself by making evil itself work toward good, toward the goodness of his creative and redemptive plan. So in Romans 3, as God takes on himself the penalty of our sin by placing it on Christ, he vindicates his justice. Christ pays the full penalty of sin, which each of us should have paid. And this magnificent vindication of his justice is also his consummate outpouring of mercy to all of us guilty sinners. In Christ, righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Psalm 85:10).

The Bible invites us to trust in Christ for our eternal salvation and for abundant life here and now (John 10:10). These are the blessings the philosophers have sought. But too often they have demanded it on their own terms. If we take a more careful look at the philosophical enterprise, we

shall see that it leads through many dark roads, to many dead ends. But on every side are obvious signposts. Philosophy can enlighten, but it fails when it excludes God's revelation and proscribes all but secular answers. But the signposts state the obvious: God is everywhere the authority, the controller, and the great loving presence. And his path leads us to trust in Jesus.

GLOSSARY

- **Nirvana (Buddhism):** The goal of human life, in which we escape from suffering (and therefore from the very being of the world) through intellectual, ethical, and spiritual discipline.
- **Propitiation (in Scripture):** Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to reconcile God with sinners.
- **Redemption (in Scripture):** Jesus' death as a substitute for his people.
- **Salvation:** Escaping from evil and its effects.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Give some examples of Western philosophers who have attempted to formulate doctrines of salvation. Compare those with the doctrine of salvation found in the Bible.
2. Frame says "Buddhism is a dead end." Why? Explain and evaluate.
3. "Buddhism in effect shifts the blame from our own hearts to the metaphysics of the world, to being in general." Explain and evaluate.
4. Niebuhr said that original sin is "the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith." Explain and evaluate.
5. Exound Paul's argument in Romans 3, from our sinfulness to our need for Christ.
6. What does it mean to say that through the cross God shows himself to be just and to be the justifier of those who believe in Jesus?

7. Describe how God's consummate accomplishment of his justice is at the same time the consummate outpouring of his mercy.

APPENDIX

LETTERS ON PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS

The following letters are drawn from *The Theological Correspondence of John Frame* (Lexham Press, 2017). They were selected for their relevance to topics covered in *We Are All Philosophers* (headings are provided as a reminder of what each chapter covered) and divided among those topics. Prefatory comments from Dr. Frame are included before many letters.

1. WHAT IS EVERYTHING MADE OF?

Thales' metaphysical water • Aristotle's being and nothingness • atomisms • holism • pantheism • the real God

THE ONE-AND-MANY PROBLEM

Van Til used to commend the doctrine of the Trinity for providing an answer to the “problem of the one and the many.” But what is that problem? And how does Trinitarian Christianity provide an answer to it? A correspondent asked about this, and I reply,

May 4, 2009

Dear J,

This is not easy to understand. I gave my best shot at it in the chapter on the Trinity in my book *CVT* (P&R, 1995). Of course, Van Til takes up the issue in many places, such as *The Defense of the Faith and Christian Apologetics*.

The basic issue: in trying to understand the universe, we try to group things under general categories: e.g., individual grapes under the concept

“grape.” That is, we try to group particulars under universals, manys under ones. Now philosophers take this a step further, as they try to analyze what the universe is “really” like. Is it really one, or many? That is to say, is there an absolute oneness, devoid of manyness? Or is there an absolute particle that cannot be grouped under some universal concept? I seem to be bumping up against the word limit, so I’d better stop.

Then philosophers hope that they can gain a godlike exhaustive knowledge of the world, either by finding an ultimate universal that includes everything, or an ultimate particle of which everything is made. But they have been unable to do this. The ultimate reason is that in God there is no many without oneness; and God has made the universe to be the same.

DID THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS KNOW ABOUT YAHWEH?

A former student asks why the Greek philosophers never refer to the God of the Jews. I reply,

Dec. 30, 2011

Dear J,

Nice to hear from you again.

Well, in the formative period of Greek philosophy, from 600 BC to AD 300, there was relatively little cultural mixing, but certainly there was some. I would not argue that the Greek philosophers had no contact with Hebrew theology. Justin Martyr thinks that Plato got the theology of the *Timaeus* from reading Moses. Of course, if that happened, Plato certainly distorted the Mosaic concept pretty severely. But I cannot prove it didn’t happen.

Of course, AD 50–300 was the period when biblical thought and Greek philosophy had the greatest contact. First Gnosticism, then Neoplatonism, incorporated language from biblical thought; but of course they gravely distorted it. Plotinus’ “One” may have been influenced by Jewish monotheism in the Philonic track. But of course the “One” was an empty transcendence.

Why, then, didn’t biblical theism become a respected philosophical position among the Greek philosophers? I can give nothing but a

theological answer: when unbelievers confront the truth apart from grace, they suppress it in unrighteousness.

So I continue to maintain that only in biblical religion (including some offshoots like Islam and Judaism) can one find absolute-personality theism, let alone Trinitarian theism.

Blessings in 2012 and beyond!

TEACHING PAGAN PHILOSOPHY IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

My correspondent reflects a controversy at a school where he teaches:

Oct. 9, 2009

Dr. Frame,

I work at a classical Christian school, where I teach ethics and apologetics. Your resources have been a tremendous help to me, and I am thankful for your service to the Lord. My reason for contacting you is that in light of an ongoing tension between staff members at our school with regard to pagan philosophy, we are having a school-wide staff meeting to discuss how such philosophy ought to be handled in Christian learning. I am hopeful that you can help me gather my thoughts on this matter. At present, my view is that pagan philosophy is utterly unhelpful in the development of the wisdom of the Christian mind except insofar as it aids in understanding the impact of such philosophy on the events of history. Either this discussion has not been had much among Christians, or I simply cannot find resources, so my questions are: (1) What is your opinion on the matter, and (2) Do you have or can you point me to any resources that will help me come to a clear, concise position on the matter?

I reply,

Hi, J,

Thanks for writing. Good to hear from you.

Classical Christian schools have to deal with the tension between their classical side and their Christian side. Classical philosophy, for example, especially Greek, is based on what Van Til called “would-be autonomous reasoning.” In contrast, any Christian philosophy worthy of the name must

be subject to the authority of Scripture. So there is an antithesis between the main thrust of Greek philosophy and the main thrust of Scripture.

I think that we can learn from pagan classical philosophy, as you say, in terms of its historical impact. (It has had some impact, alas, on Christian philosophy and theology, for instance.) I also think that Greek philosophy can help students learn to think, to construct arguments, and to develop skills of critical thinking (even in critique of Greek philosophers). Sometimes, too, secular philosophers discover truths about God's creation despite their defective epistemology. But the best reason for studying Greek philosophy (or any secular philosophy) is to understand the alternative to Christianity. In secular philosophy, we learn the pagan worldview in its most careful and clear expressions. We need to know whom we are fighting.

But a Christian school *must* understand the antithesis. If their love of the classical leads them to ignore that antithesis, their Christian commitment is compromised.

We have had exactly that problem in our local classical Christian school. My son graduated from it, and my wife has taught kindergarten there. But I think students have been hurt because the school has not been sufficiently critical of its classical heritage.

See, for example, my "Greeks Bearing Gifts" and similar articles on other worldviews in Hoffecker, ed., *Revolutions in Worldview* (P&R).

Hope some of this is helpful.

2. DO I HAVE FREE WILL?

libertarianism • evaluating libertarian free will • the problem of evil

SUMMARY ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

A very concise summary of the biblical principles I think are most important in the discussion of evil.

Nov. 25, 2013

Dear C,

Thanks so much for your prayers concerning the Baltimore trip. I do believe that the Lord blessed.

Well, the problem of evil is the most difficult problem in Christian theology. I don't think there is any fully satisfying answer to it. We can't compromise the Scripture's teaching that God is good and holy, that he hates sin and evil. On the other hand, we can't compromise the Bible's teaching that God planned all history in advance and works all things according to his will. We cannot make those convictions fit together comfortably or seamlessly.

As a theologian, of course, I keep working on it. Besides the material you read in *DG*, there are two chapters on the problem of evil in *AGG*—some slightly different approaches in there. And then I tried to bring it together in my *ST*. The triad looks something like this: (1) We have no right to find fault with God—the normative perspective, described in Job 38ff. and Romans 9. (2) God works evil into good—the situational perspective of Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28. And (3) God is doing a sanctifying work in our hearts, taking away our subjective doubts, enabling us to see all of history as a manifestation of God's justice and righteousness—the existential perspective (Rev 15:3–4).

Many, many theologians and philosophers have written about this. Many have used the problem of evil to move in unbiblical directions, some of which I've listed in the *AGG* chapters. You may want to familiarize yourself with the debates, by going into some of the sources I have listed. But I don't think it will get you very far. Best to follow the example of Job and of Paul in Romans 9: confess God's greatness and your own smallness, and ask God to do in your heart that sanctifying work that will enable you to have a fuller view of his greatness and holiness.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

An alumnus asks about the development of my argument on the problem of evil, and about the possibility of seeing it in three perspectives. He is especially interested in the role of God's wisdom in formulating the problem and in responding to it. I reply to him,

Nov. 9, 2009

Dear B,

Always good to hear from you. Nice to hear about the interest in *DCL* among the Chinese. I'd love to see it translated. As with all translations, run it past P&R first.

Well, I think I noticed a triperspectival way of looking at the problem of evil some years ago, *after AGG* was published. When that occurred to me, it wasn't because of any crises, just additional thinking.

Usually now I put it this way:

Normative: God is the ultimate criterion of good and evil, so we have no right to accuse him (Job, Rom 9).

Situational: Everything including evil works together for good. We don't always see this pattern in history, but God is working at it behind the scenes.

Existential: One day our hearts will be reconciled to the normative and situational, so that it will not occur to us to charge God with evil. In Revelation 15:3–4, everyone praises God for his justice and righteousness. In heaven, there is no evil, and there is no problem of evil either.

God's wisdom is especially connected with the situational, with how God weaves together all the vastly complicated strains of history to glorify him.

It can also be brought into the basic formulation of the problem of evil:

If God were all powerful, he would prevent evil. (control/situational)

If God were all good, he would prevent evil. (presence/existential)

If God were all wise, he would find a way to prevent evil. (authority/normative)

Of course all those premises are false, because God proves his power, goodness, and wisdom through using evil for his purpose. He is able to bring good out of evil (power), to bring praise to his goodness out of evil (goodness), and to show the way out (wisdom).

This ties in with my classification of divine attributes in *DG*: attributes of power, knowledge, love.

Hope this is some help.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A DIALOGUE

Sometimes it's best to deal with the hardest problems by a give-and-take. Here "JR" offers comments and "JF" replies.

Mar. 9, 2013

JR: Dear Dr. Frame,

One of the most difficult issues for me to face as a Christian is the origin of evil.

Evil must have existed before the creation of humanity, and its source is certainly not God himself.

JF: Depends on what you mean by "source," I suppose, but in the most obvious sense God is the source of everything: see Exodus 20:11; Ephesians 1:11; Acts 2:23.

JR: This makes me question so many things. We can say God "allowed" evil into the world, but that must mean there is power outside of God, something external.

JF: I prefer not to use the term "allowed," or "permitted," because these terms encourage thoughts like this one. In any case, Scripture never suggests that there is any power other than God that constrains his activities.

JR: Then, as long as I go down this path of thinking, I suspect that God is bound by some external laws, in various different ways. My head hurts too much to think of examples.

JF: This is true only in the sense that once God has sovereignly determined to do A, he cannot do not-A, and he cannot do anything inconsistent with A. Now some people will say that for this reason he is "constrained by logic," but that is misleading. Logic is simply his nature, the consistency of his thought and action.

JR: How are we to understand the nature of God as somebody who is not governed by *any* external absolutes?

JF: He is governed by his own character, and that's enough. That does not imply in the least that he is arbitrary or capricious.

JR: Specifically, the idea of evil makes it really hard for me to think about sin, original sin, objective morality, etc.

JF: Sure. But to summarize the biblical response to the problem of evil:

1. Normative perspective: In Job and Romans 9 God declares that human beings have no right to challenge the goodness and wisdom of his decisions.
2. Situational perspective: In passages like Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28 God says that all evils work toward good. That means that the totality of history is better than it would have been without any evil.
3. Existential perspective: In Revelation 15:3–4, the saints worship God's righteousness without hesitation. This is in effect a promise that one day our hearts will be so well-informed, or so changed in their evaluation of God's work, that they will not have any "problem" with evil. They will be thoroughly convinced of the righteousness of God.

JR: I know these are big thoughts, and I know you are busy.

If you get to answering, thank you.

JF: You're welcome.

HOW DOES GOD WORK ALL THINGS TOGETHER FOR GOOD?

The first consideration is to understand how difficult the question is.

Nov. 26, 2011

Good questions, M. A few comments:

1. Yes, I hold to a Calvinistic compatibilism: freedom is the ability to do what one most desires.
2. There are other forms of freedom too: moral freedom, political freedom, etc. See chapter 8 of my *DG*.
3. Yes, I believe that God has planned all evil for a higher good. Romans 8:28 is explicit on this.
4. I don't know of any Bible passage that particularizes this principle so that for evil A there is always a higher good B that A brings

about.

5. I don't think this kind of particularization is required for a greater-good defense.
6. Still, I do believe that every particular event is foreordained by God and that it makes some contribution to his greater glory.
7. It would be theoretically possible to particularize the actual contribution of event A to God's greater glory and therefore for the greater good. At least God himself knows how each event makes such a contribution.
8. But God is not obligated to tell us what that particular contribution is, and we may never know. Indeed it may be beyond our understanding.
9. In addition to the greater-good defense, I think Scripture warrants other responses to the problem of evil:
10. "Who are you, O man, who replies against God?"
11. The eschatological response: one day we will stand around God's throne commanding his goodness, without a shadow of doubt. Evidently, God has a means of eventually removing the problem of evil from our consciousness.
12. I discuss these matters in chapter 9 of *DG* and chapters 6–7 of my *AGG*.

Hope you find something helpful in these comments.

MAY WE EVER SAY THAT GOD IS THE “CAUSE” OF EVIL?

The problem of evil is difficult enough without getting into hassles over vocabulary. Here a friend asks about “cause.”

Apr. 12, 2011

J,

You should go back and read my discussions in chapters 4 and 9 of *DG*.

I do believe that God brings about everything that comes to pass. That's the argument of chapter 4.

Chapter 9, toward the end, asks about the language we use to describe God's relation to evil, such as "authors," "causes," "predestines," "permits," "foreordains," etc. Basically here I argue that we have two issues to worry about: (1) the denotations of these terms and (2) their connotations.

"Authors" should be avoided, although it is rarely defined with any clarity. As much as I can tell, it means both that God brings evil about and also that in doing this he is to blame for the evil. So I advise readers that they should never describe God as the "author of evil."

As for "cause," I don't think it's wrong denotatively to describe God as the cause of evil, as the term is generally used in English. However, some authors seem to take it as having some of the same meaning as "authors," and its connotations give one a bit of the same feeling as "authors." So I recommend that my readers don't say that God is the "cause" of evil, though it is not nearly as bad a word as "authors." Calvin occasionally used "cause" in this context.

Other words, like "predestine," "bring about," "ordain," etc. may be used (and often are) with discretion.

My point is that this is as much a problem of language as of the actual teaching of Scripture. The teaching of Scripture is clear, but we must make a responsible choice of words in which to formulate that teaching.

Hope that's of some help.

WHY DID GOD MAKE SATAN, AND SIN?

An old friend writes that these questions came up in a Bible study with his wife:

Jan. 20, 2010

Why did God create Satan?

This stemmed from the question:

Why did God want us to sin—via the tree of good and evil?

Any thoughts would be interesting. Thank you.

I replied,

Hi, B,

Good to hear about the Bible reading program. A few thoughts.

1. God made Satan before he was Satan. There are at least a few suggestions in Scripture (not really clear) that Satan began as a good angel, but rebelled against God at a later point. See 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6.
2. God did not want us to sin. But he foreordained it for his good purpose.
3. To elaborate: when Scripture talks about God's willing or wanting something, it speaks in two ways:
 - a. Sometimes what God wants or wills is what he has foreordained to happen. Theologians call that God's "decretive" will.
 - b. Other times what God wants or wills is his moral preferences. That is sometimes called God's "preceptive" will.

The deep question is: Why are these often contrary to one another? Why does God foreordain things contrary to his moral preferences?

The answer is that God accomplishes a better result by foreordaining evil and overcoming it than he would have by not foreordaining it in the first place.

How can he do that with really terrible events like 9/11?

The answer is, I don't know. And not knowing is OK.

Blessings to you and A.

3. CAN I KNOW THE WORLD?

justified, true belief • justification

In this section, I discuss the knowledge of God, then some of the traditional concerns of epistemology, including logic and certainty. Toward the end I will expound my triperspectival approach to knowledge.

CAN CREATURES KNOW GOD'S ESSENTIAL BEING? (WITH THOUGHTS ON KLINE AND THEONOMY)

I often receive criticism of my view that we can know God's "essence" in some sense. Of course it all depends on the definition of "essence." Below I answer a letter by one who expressed such concerns.

Jan. 8, 1991

Dear D,

Thanks for sending a copy of your very interesting letter to G. I found it very stimulating. Let me share with you some of my reactions.

I confess I find a certain relativism in your statement that "God's essential being cannot be known by his relations to any particular creature, since such relations are always governed, in part, by the creature." This would imply, of course, that God's essential being cannot be known at all, since we (individually or in corporate groups) perceive God's being only through creaturely perspectives. But I think Scripture tells us that it is possible to know God "as he is": not exhaustively, but truly (see *DKG*). Further, and more relevantly to ethics, it is possible for us to be *like God*, not just to be like some creaturely image of him. Matthew 5:45–48 and other passages are clear on that: when we obey God's commandments, we become more like him.

The fact that we are creatures and see everything through creaturely eyes does warn us against excess dogmatism and pride. "We know in part," says Paul. But this fact does not cause the biblical writers to hesitate in proclaiming what God has revealed about himself and what God requires of us.

I would agree with your more cautious statements in this area, e.g., "God's relations to Israel, then, reveal the character of God insofar as God's relationship to Israel permits his character to be thereby revealed." That seems to me to state both the positive and the negative sides well. Still, it would seem from biblical evidence that quite a bit can be learned of God's character from his revelation to Israel. We should not worship idols because God is jealous. We should keep the Sabbath because God kept his. We should obey all his words because he is holy (Lev 18; 19). Granted, Israel is only one small nation and its history only a brief period of time in God's sight. Yet its position in Scripture and redemptive history make clear that God's revelation to Israel is especially significant. That revelation is not

simply revelation to one nation, to be averaged in with, say, God's revelation to the Chinese and the Sri Lankans. If it were, we might expect to be greatly misled if we drew conclusions from God's revelation to Israel. But no; Israel had great advantages over the other nations (Rom 3:1ff.) in its receipt of the divine oracles. Salvation is of the Jews. Israel knew God in a way that the other nations did not.

I also agree that God manifests himself differently to the same nation, body, individual, at different stages of maturity. But again, we should not overstate that difference. You ask, "How is the unchanging love of a parent revealed in the purchasing of braces for a child with crooked teeth?" Well, if that were the *only* fact we knew about the parent, and if we were otherwise totally ignorant about the nature of parental love, it would not tell us much at all. On the other hand, when that fact is added to others, it does contribute to the overall picture.

Of course it would be hermeneutically foolish to say that because the parent's love leads in one case to the purchase of braces that it must therefore always lead to that. The way to avoid such foolishness, as you well know, is to take the situational perspective into account. There is a continuity in the behavior of love, but that continuity requires analogous situations. If a child does not need braces, a loving parent will surely not force braces upon him! But if the parent buys braces for the first child and a second encounters precisely the same need, we may well expect (other things being equal, such as finances) that the loving parent will make the same choice. Of course, no two situations are *precisely* the same. But we must not allow that fact to cast us into relativism. There are sufficient analogies among situations that we can know God's relation to them. Otherwise, we couldn't even apply *New Testament* principles to our modern lives, let alone the Mosaic law.

With the above *caveats*, I also agree with you that Scripture, including the Decalogue, gives us, not "abstract laws," or "norms as norms." In my language, the norms are "applied" norms, norms applied to particular circumstances. Even in the Decalogue itself we find elements that do not literally apply to our situation: Moses tells the people to honor their parents so that their days will be long in the land of Palestine. Of course, in the New Testament, the focus on Palestine is replaced by a focus on the whole

world, and thus Paul re-contextualizes the fifth commandment in Ephesians 6:1ff.

Which brings us to theonomy/Kline. No, I respectfully disagree with your point that “Kline alone (programmatically) insists on evaluating the Sinai norms circumstantially before considering their application to other circumstances.” I have been fairly close friends with a number of theonomists, including Bahnsen (a former student), Jordan (also a former student, who no longer considers himself a theonomist), North (a classmate), and I have been around this barn many times. All of these men grant in principle that OT laws must be analyzed circumstantially. They don’t *emphasize* the point as much as Kline does, because they believe that the result of the analysis will reveal far more continuity than discontinuity. Hence, as I pointed out in my theonomy article, they often use misleading rhetoric that suggests there has been no change at all. But if you look carefully at the theonomic literature, you will see that they often make allowance for changing circumstances—not only under the “ceremonial” label, but on other grounds as well. Theonomists to a man reject Sider’s proposal, for example, to re-institute the Jubilee or to use the Jubilee as a model for social welfare. All except Rushdoony reject contemporary application of the dietary laws. Most have doubts about the Puritan Sabbath. Etc., etc.

So the theonomists don’t differ from Kline in whether they recognize circumstantial change. They differ with him on the extent of that circumstantial change and the emphasis, therefore, to be placed on it.

I am against *proving* theological points by using “emphasis” arguments. To me, what the theonomists emphasize in contrast with Kline is not very interesting in itself. I do think, however, that when people confuse differences in emphasis from differences in principle someone needs to make the relevant distinctions. I thought I was doing that in my theonomy paper.

You make a distinction in your letter between Kline, who believes in “circumstantially adjusted norms,” and Murray/theonomy, who believe in “norms as norms,” but who nevertheless concede that the “norms as norms” “may be applied and adjusted later.” I’m not quite sure what the cash value of this difference is. On either basis, you could have both continuity and

discontinuity; indeed, a person holding the one view could agree with one holding the other on every substantive question of Christian ethics. Further, I'm not sure you're even right. I believe that many theonomists agree that the norms given on Sinai are "circumstantially adjusted." As for Murray, I don't know that he ever addressed the question.

I'll grant that the idea of circumstantially adjusted norms is inconsistent with the simplistic theonomic arguments about "God's unchanging character." But I take those arguments to be rhetorical adornments, not to be taken very seriously. They come from an earlier stage of the discussion, and they've taken on a kind of liturgical force, but the theonomists don't use that sort of argument to resolve practical questions, any more than Kline uses his argument about the OT's lack of canonical status.

There may be some confusion here that can be clarified by reference to Pratt's article on "Pictures, Windows, and Mirrors." See *DKG* for my discussion of that. Scripture can be seen (1) as authoritative canon (picture), (2) as a means of access to redemptive-historical events (window), and (3) as a reflection of our own character and situations (mirror). We sometimes ask the question as to whether Scripture is itself our authority or whether it is merely a means of pointing us to events, etc., that are themselves more properly called "revelation." Well, the answer of course is that Scripture is itself revelation, but that it is also a means of access to revelation. It is word revelation (picture), and it points to "event revelation" (window). Other theologians have insisted that there is no revelation until it is applied to the self; well, there is some truth in that too (mirror; "existential revelation"). But Scripture plays the crucial role in all three. In general, one can line them up as normative (picture), situational (window), and existential (mirror).

Now some of us, probably most theonomists among them, think of Scripture largely as "picture." It is, the argument goes, Scripture itself that is supremely authoritative, not something beyond Scripture. In this way of thinking, it is natural to conceive of Scripture as "norm as norm." It may be applied to other circumstances, but it should not be regarded as itself the application of anything more basic than itself. Otherwise it would not be the supreme revelation. Earlier in the letter I disavowed the notion of Scripture

as “norm as norm”; but in the present context, understanding the purpose of the expression, I cannot criticize it.

Others of us, like Kline perhaps, prefer the “window” model: Scripture is not itself norm so much as it is (e.g., for Kline) an infallible record of the giving of norms in various historical situations. Therefore, it is easier to see all norms as being contextualized by the situations in which they are given. Those preferring the “mirror” figure would make a similar point, perhaps with a more subjective focus.

My own approach, of course, is triperspectival. So I can say that Scripture is, in one way, a “norm in itself,” while it is also a historical pointer to situational contextualizations of norms. It is “norm in itself” in the sense that we can never find any higher criterion by which to judge the norms of Scripture; when we find how Scripture applies to us, we may never say “no.” But it is also a situational pointer in the sense that to determine the very meaning of the norm-as-norm we need to take account of the situations to which the law was given and the analogies/disalogies between those situations and our own.

For all your evident understanding of and sympathy with my position, I’m rather surprised that in your whole letter you don’t make some reference to my principle that “meaning is application.” In the present context: the meaning of the Scripture *is* its application to all possible situations. Finding the meaning, then, of course, requires a careful assessment of the situation originally addressed by the laws and also a careful assessment of the situations to which we wish to apply them. If there is such a thing as a “norm as norm,” its meaning is to be found in its application; so perhaps “norm as norm” is a misleading term, even granting all that can be said about Scripture as our final authority. On the other hand, perhaps it is useful in guarding against relativism.

So I think we wind up agreeing more than you thought when you wrote your letter to G. To summarize, (1) I think theonomists do make the distinctions you wish to make, but they do it in “small print.” (2) I think the distinction between “norm as norm” and “situationally adjusted norm” is valid, but it needs a bit of qualification here and there: (a) you must beware of relativism; (b) “norm as norm” can be used as a legitimate description of biblical authority, though it may mislead without other descriptions; and (c)

it may not make as much difference as you seem to think it does in resolving the present arguments. Even if I'm wrong and the theonomists are not sensitive to your distinction, I think they could *become* sensitive to it without changing the rest of their position very much.

I was very pleased by the final paragraph of your letter disavowing "Westminster bashing." I wish we could use this kind of comment in our publicity! Unfortunately, the current norm (!) of public relations is that advertising must never suggest that anyone has ever been critical of the object being advertised.

D, may God richly bless your labors for him. I'm glad that whatever the place of your labors, you are still helping us to think through the hard questions.

KNOWING AS WE ARE KNOWN

How shall we understand Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:12 that we shall one day "know as we are known"? Does that mean that then our knowledge will equal God's?

Aug. 26, 2011

Hi, S,

"Fully" is always relative to a context. In 1 Corinthians 13, the context is adulthood vs. childhood. When we become men, we give up childish ways. So the contrast is not between partial knowledge and exhaustive knowledge. It is between the knowledge of a child and the knowledge of an adult. The still larger context is that love is the central Christian virtue and love requires intellectual humility (cf. 8:1–3). So we need to understand that our present knowledge is partial, fragmentary. That will keep us from fighting childish battles with other believers over who knows the most.

So 1 Corinthians 13:12 is not a diversion into philosophical epistemology. Paul is not saying that our knowledge of God will be exhaustive. Of course, God's knowledge of us is exhaustive, but that's not the point. The point is that in heaven we will enter into a knowledge of God that differs from our present knowledge as a child's knowledge differs from an adult's. The emphasis is not on knowing propositions, but knowing a

person, having a friendship. So we will enter into a higher level of friendship: face-to-face rather than just by image. In that respect there is a parallel between God's knowledge of us and our knowledge of him. We will have a face-to-face friendship with him, as he has a face-to-face friendship with us.

That's the best I can do in the time available.

WHAT IS “BELIEF”?

My correspondent cannot find any specific treatment of this concept in my writings.

May 11, 2010

Hi, I,

Thanks for writing.

I don't know if I've ever discussed the term “belief” as such. In the context of salvation, of course, it is the same as saving faith. If you take the Apostles' Creed to be a treatment of the content of saving faith, then that would be the place to look.

On the other hand, “belief” is often equated with “assent to true propositions,” which is an aspect of saving faith, but not the whole of it. And believing a true proposition is roughly the same as knowledge, the philosophical definition of which is “justified, true belief.”

Now *DKG* is about “knowledge” of course, knowledge of God, but of other things as well. Here most everything in *DKG* is relevant. You might look at my interaction with Gordon Clark on 54–57. Clark defines faith as assent to true propositions, which I think is unwise. But if you “assent” in the strongest possible sense, you will live according to the propositions you assent to, and you will trust completely the God who reveals those propositions. In that case, and in that case only, is assent equivalent to saving faith. Anyhow, the account of assent in those pages may be what you are looking for.

So I would understand “belief,” either as the equivalent of saving faith, or as the element of assent that is found in saving faith. It involves (1) accepting the truth (normative), (2) behavior consistent with that acceptance

(situational), and (3) cognitive rest (existential), the lack of any inclination to search for an alternative (*DKG*, 152ff.).

Hope that helps.

P.S.: Just one other thought. If knowledge is “justified, true belief,” then justification is normative, truth situational, and belief existential—the personal commitment required for knowledge.

WHAT IS REASON, AND HOW DO WE USE IT?

A student writes,

Aug. 16, 2011

Hi, Dr. Frame,

I've been working on a writing sample in the philosophy of mind. As you know, it deals with the old subject-object distinction. So naturally, I'm excited about discussing the role of norms in this topic. In fact, I've chosen to narrow the topic on the role of norms in conscious experience (the existential). So I'm checking *DKG* on the governing laws and the self.

Here's my question: I've noticed in some of your lectures that you used the term “reason” as something that “works on” the data. It sounds very intuitive because one could say, for instance, that it puts things in some kind of “order” according to our pre-commitments or theory. But is there anything else that you may add, even for pedagogical purposes? I'm trying to motivate some reason to invoke norms in conscious experience, but I guess I am trying to strengthen my grip on how norms govern to help my cause.

I replied,

Hi, L,

Well, I've always said that we should define reason as a human faculty—our ability to draw inferences, recognize contradictions, collect evidence, interpret data, etc.

The alternative is to define reason as a content: the laws of logic, scientific knowledge, someone's philosophy (as in Hegel). So, on that approach, “reason” is my particular view, and for you it is your particular

view. But to do that is to dismiss everyone who disagrees with you as unreasonable at the outset. Now of course I do think that people who disagree with me are unreasonable, but to say that at the outset quashes dialogue.

If reason is a human faculty, then reason is a *personal* activity. And the person exercising reason must make choices—in the end, religious choices—about how he will reason. That is, of course, the normative question. Ultimately, the question is “What rules will I follow, so that my reason will function as it should?” The answer will of course refer to the laws of logic and empirical methodology; but for the Christian the ultimate answer is found in the norms of Scripture. It is God’s revelation that validates even the laws of logic and empirical method. And without that revelation, these subnorms cannot function meaningfully.

In daily experience, we usually don’t say to ourselves, “Oh, there’s a car! I must apply the norms of Scripture to determine whether it is a taxicab or not.” That is, in daily life our application of norms is mostly unconscious. But if our reasoning is not normed, at some point it will fail at its task.

Hope that helps.

REASON, LOGIC, AND EMOTION

Nov. 28, 2012

Dear V,

It is important to define terms like “reason,” “emotion,” etc. “Reason” in the narrowest sense is a human capacity that enables us to (1) distinguish valid from invalid inferences, and (2) recognize consistency and inconsistency.

So understood, reason is our ability to do the things that are scientifically studied under the category of “logic.” It would be important to point out that reason *alone*, so defined, cannot determine the truth of anything. At the very least, logical syllogisms require premises, but those come from outside logic—from sense experience, testimony, authority, even emotion. So in a broader sense, reason is not limited to the operations of

formal logic. For a good argument is not only subject to the rules of logic (“valid”), but it also has true premises (“sound”).

So in the Bible knowledge is not limited to the activity of reason, intellect, or logic. It resides in the whole person. So an argument ending in “therefore” (Rom 8:1 or 12:1, e.g.) is typically based on many sorts of premises, many kinds of evidence.

DKG explores how “intellect,” then, is dependent on sense experience, testimony, even emotion, if it is to do its job. And “sense experience” can’t do its job either, unless the brain is fit to group sensations into concepts; but conceptualization often requires logic. So rationality, sense experience, and yes, even emotion, are interdependent.

So “reason” may be defined in a broader sense: the *disciplined* use of the mind (including *all* our capacities—sensation, testimony, emotion, etc.). It is here that T will have to make her case, if it can be made. Her point will be that it is better to seek knowledge in a disciplined, methodical way than to assert any dumb idea that pops into our heads. I wouldn’t recommend that she try to exclude emotion or imagination from the mix. Paul’s admonition to “prove all things” (1 Thess 5:21) may lend biblical support.

But then there is a lot to be said about what “discipline” means in this connection. Certainly it means being self-conscious about our presuppositions. To evaluate any argument, there have to be some standards we can appeal to. And of course our faith enters in here. We have to decide on the role of divine revelation.

IS PERSUASION AN ELEMENT OF PROOF?

On this question a friend showed me that my formulation in DKG wasn’t quite consistent with my formulation in AGG. Here I describe my view as of 2012, without trying to reconcile the texts.

Sept. 17, 2012

Dear J,

Yes, I appreciate the problem. Two conflicting definitions of proof.

Well, of course, “proof” is a flexible term. It rarely occurs in Scripture, but when it does it seems to mean “what ought to persuade” as in Acts 1:3.

In Acts 1:3 it refers, I think, to events rather than arguments, though of course events can function as data for an argument.

In my teaching now I don't use the term "proof" very much, except to refer to its use by other people. I tell the students that a "good argument" should have three features: (1) logical validity (normative), (2) true premises (situational), and (3) persuasive content (existential). What I call "narrowly circular" arguments have qualities (1) and (2). As for (3), perhaps it can be said that they *ought* to persuade, but in fact they rarely do. That's why we "broaden" the circle—to make it more persuasive.

In one sense, it's the Spirit's work to persuade. But our responsibility is to work with him, to make the best case we can, following the example of Jesus and the biblical writers.

Persuasion, then, is part of any proof. A narrowly circular argument *ought* to persuade. A broader circular argument, used by the Spirit, actually does.

INNATE KNOWLEDGE AND THE SENSES

My correspondent asks,

Aug. 7, 2010

What innate knowledge do we have that has not come to us through our senses? Don't theologians say we have innate knowledge of God? Innate means inborn, right? Do you think that "innate" might be an improper term to use regarding man's knowledge of God?

I reply,

Dear M,

Sense experience is only part of the total human knowledge apparatus. Knowledge requires sensation, but it also requires reason, intuition, imagination, etc. See my *DKG*, which seeks to integrate these.

There are many things we know about that we cannot "sense." You can't sense moral rightness, but you know what it is. You can't deduce moral obligation from any object of sensation; if you claimed to do that, you would be guilty of a naturalistic fallacy. You can't sense any abstract

qualities, like virtue, or manhood (you can sense a man, but not manhood as a generality).

Further, sense knowledge does not function alone. A baby cannot identify an “elm tree,” though he has various sensations that come from the tree. As he grows, he will learn abstract concepts like “tree” and “elm tree,” so that when he sees an elm tree he can integrate his sensations with mental categories that he has picked up in other ways.

Further, you can’t sense anything unless your sense organs are working together with your brain to create sensations. That coordination is something different from sensation itself.

Theologically: someone might have seen a man coming out of Jesus’ grave on the first Easter morning. But he would not have known that the Son of God, having atoned for our sins, was risen for our justification, from sense experience alone. That sense experience would have to be interpreted by the apostolic gospel message. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that the Corinthians learned of the resurrection through the apostolic preaching.

Of course, I disagree with Gordon Clark’s view that we learn *nothing* from sensation. Sensation is a necessary element of knowledge, but is not sufficient for knowledge.

Hope that’s of some help.

TRUTH, TOLERANCE, AND RELATIVISM

Here I write to a German friend who has written a paper addressing the Brethren movement on the above issues.

Jan. 8, 1999

Dear M,

Good to hear from you again. Sorry to be so long in replying; you got me during my chief paper-grading season!

I know very little about the history of the Brethren movement. As you present it, founded on the premise that “none of us is completely right,” it certainly is attractive to me. I am trying to tell my Reformed brethren that that should be an article of faith among us—hence the need to perceive matters multiperspectively.

On the other hand, every one of us, no matter how open-minded he seeks to be to the ideas of others, makes “a claim to being right” any time he seeks to communicate truth. Truth is objective. If I preach something, I am claiming it is the truth and that those who disagree are wrong. So there is a bit of a logical problem that nags us at this point.

However, when I claim that something is the truth, I can make that claim with different degrees of certainty or dogmatism, and with different sorts of attitudes toward those who disagree with me. I know that even when I know I’m right, I *can* be wrong; and that knowledge that I *can* be wrong leads me at times to certain levels of tolerance for those who differ, depending of course on my degree of certainty, the importance of the issue, etc.

That’s what Christians often fail to understand. They often assume that if they have the truth, everyone who disagrees in even the slightest degree must be cast into outer darkness, lest we give aid and comfort to relativists. The right degree and kind of openness are difficult to define, but at least we cannot pretend that there should be no toleration at all. If everybody in a church or denomination had to believe *exactly* the same things, with no disagreement whatever, those denominations and churches could not exist.

So I applaud the thrust of your essay. The one area where I was somewhat disappointed was in your pessimism about the possibility of church unity (page 5). You say “the break-up into so many different groups was probably the only way things could really work.” As I argued in *Evangelical Reunion*, God did not sanction the break-up of the church, and therefore we cannot accept that break-up as a net benefit (except in the Romans 8:28 sense in which *all* evils have a net benefit). The church “works” best when it follows God’s plan, and God’s plan was for a unified body. Whether restoration of that unity is possible, humanly speaking (I suspect it is not, but you are too dogmatic [!] in saying bluntly that it is “not possible”), it is an ideal for us to work toward.

Your comments on 6–9 are excellent, very similar to what I have been saying to people in my circles. (Naturally, if you’re saying what I say, it must be excellent! ☺) I suppose you have heard of the movement in the US toward “progressive dispensationalism”: Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, Robert Saucy, et al. These men really do seem to be bringing

dispensationalism and covenant theology closer together, as, on the traditional Reformed side, the “redemptive history” movement inspired by Geerhardus Vos’s work in biblical theology.

I also like your point at the bottom of 9 that “Christ is never predictable.” The OT prophets predicted Christ, but he was nothing like the people expected him to be. In hindsight, we see a wonderful coherence between messianic prophecy and the incarnate Jesus, but to see that coherence we must get below the surface of the prophecies and read them in the light of their fulfillment. I suspect that many more theological surprises are awaiting us in glory. It is not wrong to be earnest in proclaiming the revelation we have. But we must always confess our finitude and the limits of our understanding.

I certainly hope that your paper will have a good hearing among the Brethren. May God richly bless your labors in 1999!

LOGIC: GOD’S, MAN’S, AND SCRIPTURE’S

What do we do about apparent logical contradictions in theology? This letter tries to give some guidance.

Nov. 29, 2010

Hi, J,

I can’t recall the context of this statement, and I’m too lazy to listen to all my lectures again. So I’ll try to reconstruct my pattern of thinking.

God is a logical being. That is to say, he knows exactly what arguments are valid/sound, and he knows exactly what propositions are consistent/inconsistent with one another. As such, God’s logic is not higher or lower than Scripture in authority. Both God’s logic and God’s Scripture are divine thoughts, of equal authority.

Human thought seeks (or should seek) to think God’s thoughts after him. In learning to think, we develop human logic, analogous to God’s. But because of our finitude and sin we make mistakes in logic, just as in everything else. So Russell’s logic is different from Aristotle’s in some matters, Russell having thought that there were mistakes in Aristotle’s. So there may be points at which we should not trust someone’s logical

conclusions. But we should always trust God. In that sense, God's word, Scripture, is a higher norm than logic.

Where this becomes important practically is when we face "apparent contradictions" such as God's goodness and the existence of evil, or God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Now I'm inclined to think that neither of these is really a *logical* contradiction, even in terms of human logic. But let's say that such a problem turns out to generate a contradiction in terms of, say, Quine's system. In that case, we ought to regard Scripture as a higher source than Quine's logic.

I don't KNOW of any place where we are required, even in terms of a human system of logic, to violate logical norms in a formal way. If there were an "apparent" contradiction of this sort, I would certainly seek alternative ways of dealing with the problem, and if I couldn't find any I would probably just set the problem aside, awaiting a better solution at a later time. So the ranking of logic below Scripture is more a theoretical point than a practical one. But it is important that in a general statement of Christian epistemology we place God's authority above everything else.

LAWS OF LOGIC

A student asks me to comment theologically on the nature of logic. If his letter had come in 2013 instead of 2009, I would have directed him to Vern Poythress's Logic (Crossway).

Jan. 27, 2010

Dear T,

Thanks for writing and for the kind words.

I discuss the nature of logic somewhat in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Also, Greg Bahnsen discussed it a bit in his famous debate with Gordon Stein. You might consult those sources.

Laws of logic may be thought of as a description of the world, but then further questions arise: (1) *Why* is the universe logical? Is it likely that the logical character of the universe can be accounted for by matter, motion, time, and chance? (2) How can we know that the universe is logical, when our experience of the universe is only fragmentary? (3) *Why ought* we to

think logically? In *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, I argue that all knowledge, including logic, is ethical, because it involves an *ought*. The *ought* doesn't follow from the fact that the universe is arranged in such-and-such a way. To derive oughts from mere facts is a naturalistic fallacy. In *AGG* I argue that the only possible source of moral oughts is an absolute-personal being.

If logical laws are immaterial, immutable, universal, and *obligatory* (that is important—see above), then they presuppose an absolute-personal source.

Hope that's helpful.

ETHICS OF LOGIC

A very important point in my epistemology and apologetics is that logic (and thinking generally) is subject to ethical norms, and that those in turn presuppose revelation. But some students of logic have a hard time seeing this point.

Dec. 8, 2010

J,

I don't know what your friend means in saying that violation of logical norms "has no content." When I think illogically, I do something I should not do. Is the point that murder is more empirical than my committing a logical fallacy? I think both refer to events in the empirical world, but that both also presuppose conceptual understanding. How is a murder different from other killings? Empirically, both may appear the same. A logical fallacy may lead me to go somewhere that doesn't exist—empirically verifiable behavior. But of course the thinking behind it is not reducible to the empirical.

What definition of ethics applies to both in the same way? Ethics as our view of right and wrong. In *DCL*, of course, I have a more theologically focused definition. But generally, ethical wrong is doing something we shouldn't do. We shouldn't murder, and we shouldn't think illogically.

On your second paragraph: I think in both logic and ethics there is a difference between the principles themselves and my obligation to care

about them. Someone could have an excellent ethical theory and still be a very bad person. But caring about ethics is an ethical obligation, and I think caring about logic is also an ethical obligation. I also think that caring about logic is a *logical* obligation. What does it mean to say that “A implies B”? In part it means that if I believe A, I ought to believe B as well. Otherwise, logic is just a game with no bearing on the real world. (I developed this argument a bit in *DKG*, 247–251.)

And yes, it does go back to our presuppositions. Given a theistic understanding of ethics and logic, the parallelism between the two is easier to see.

ADMITTING YOUR OWN CONTRADICTIONS

Why Christians should be more inclined to do so.

Dec. 19, 2012

R,

I don’t think that most philosophers are aware of contradictions in their own systems. One exception is Plato, in the late dialogue *Parmenides*, where he is unable to answer some important objections to his form/matter scheme. Another is Wittgenstein, who, at the end of his *Tractatus*, admits that his own book breaks his own rules for the meaningfulness of language and therefore should be considered only an aid to mystical contemplation.

But most philosophers are unwilling to admit such contradictions, or even tensions. Sometimes (as in the case of Descartes’s pineal gland theory) they resort to unpersuasive *ad hoc* measures to repair problems in their systems. But most of them don’t do even that.

Christians should be more prone to admit tensions and apparent contradictions because they believe the divine mind, which establishes reality, is higher than they can comprehend. It is not hard for them to admit that God may have a resolution to a problem that the human mind is unable (now or ever) to reach. Unfortunately, we sometimes behave as if we were infallible.

CONCISE EPISTEMOLOGY

I think this short letter covers all the bases for the question of how we can be certain of the truth.

July 21, 2011

Dear J,

Thanks for writing, and for your interest in my work.

True, our interpretations of Scripture are subject to correction. But as you say, they are subject to correction only by means of an epistemology that is itself derived from the Bible. So as the Reformers said, “Scripture is its own interpreter”—*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. There is a kind of circularity involved in that, but it’s the kind I discuss in *DKG* and in many other places (as *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, *Doctrine of the Word of God*).

What this means in practice is that when we run into something in the Bible that is obscure to us, we turn to passages dealing with the same topic that are clearer. Scripture is redundant in that good kind of way. It reiterates its teaching many times, in many contexts.

In the end, of course, there will be some things we cannot understand, even by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Some of those, perhaps, are beyond the capacity of the human mind. Others we may understand in heaven, but not now. Still others may await sharper theologians than we to discover the meaning. But none of those possibilities invalidate the infallibility of Scripture itself. Indeed, that is what we would expect if God were to give us an inspired and infallible book.

How can we have confidence in Scripture, given the fallibility of our interpretations? Well, there are some things about which every Christian is certain: God exists, Jesus is his Son, Christ died for our sins and rose again. Those certainties form our initial intellectual foundation. Everything else must be reconcilable with these certainties if we are to accept it. As we grow in our knowledge of Scripture, propositions are added to the foundation; certainty increases. Of course, we will never be totally certain of everything, but we have a foundation for knowledge beyond what any non-Christian has.

Practically: we test our interpretations of Scripture by many means, including extrascriptural data. But when, having done that, we come to a settled interpretation of what Scripture says, then we accept that over against any other authority.

For more, see this on my website: <https://frame-poythress.org/certainty/>. I also discuss these matters at some length in *Doctrine of the Word of God*.

ARE THERE ARGUMENTS THAT WARRANT CERTAINTY?

Van Til claimed that his transcendental argument warranted “absolute certainty” of the truth of Christian theism. A correspondent wrote to ask how that might work. I replied,

June 22, 2009

1. Consider the narrowly circular argument, “The Bible says God is true; the Bible is God’s word; therefore, the Bible is true.” Now that argument is not very persuasive to skeptics. But it is absolutely valid, and also sound (i.e., the premises are true). It *warrants* certainty, in the sense that even though it may not persuade everyone, it *ought* to persuade everyone.
2. If it were possible to collect all the data of general revelation and formulate that data perfectly into an argument for God’s existence, that argument would warrant certainty concerning God’s existence.
3. The work of the Spirit, then, is necessary, not to improve the quality or amount of the evidence, but to illumine that evidence and persuade us to think rightly about it. He does not turn an 80% probability argument into a 100% probability. Rather, he enables us to see that the evidence as God has made it is 100% probable.
4. It is the Spirit who enables us to *presuppose* correctly. When we presuppose that the biblical God exists and reason on that presupposition, we make that presupposition our ultimate criterion of certainty, and therefore 100% certain. That enables us to be persuaded of arguments of type #1, which are otherwise not very persuasive.

He wrote in reply,

I have been meditating on your four points below since last Monday (I walk for an hour every morning, so that provides a good opportunity to work on these kinds of things). I was especially intrigued by your second point: “If it were possible to collect all the data of general revelation and formulate that data perfectly into an argument for God’s existence, that argument would warrant certainty concerning God’s existence.” At first blush I thought that this just expresses an ideal, and what good is an ideal if—apologetically speaking—it is unattainable? But in thinking more about it throughout the week, I am beginning to think that this second point is really the key to the other three points. In fact, I think this is more than just an ideal; it is what we actually attempt to do in coming to certainty of the Christian faith. But it is not, at bottom, a purely conscious exercise; it is mostly a subconscious activity of the heart and conscience that becomes conscious if we reflect upon it. Let me explain.

When I was a programmer/analyst and used to teach programming, I used to work on some very knotty problems. In programming, you can actually solve a problem a number of different ways—some very elegant, some not so elegant. When I got stumped in trying to solve a difficult problem, and this often happened, I would simply go to bed and sleep on it. Almost every time I would wake up with an elegant solution to the problem without having cogitated on it. All the thinking was largely frustrated thinking beforehand, but the elegant solution (with the programming code included) would come to me like a revelation (or illumination). It was through my programming experience that I learned the power of the subconscious mind, which I believe is the reservoir of the conscience. Almost without exception, these solutions didn’t just work; they worked beautifully, the only exceptions being those where I had misconstrued the problem in the first place.

You can see—I’m sure—where I am going with this in apologetics. Newman’s illative sense is really explained by this kind of assessment of “all the data of general revelation,” or at least all the data we collect as individuals seeking God by the Spirit. The conscience makes the decision for Christ based on the Bible, the Spirit’s illumination, and God’s revelation in nature and the self. This is what advocates of the “cumulative case” approach are talking about, but the problem is that they treat the cumulative

case as if it is a neutral, inductive, legal argument for the Christian faith. Really, the cumulative case is a reckoning of the regenerate conscience, which works in a legal, inductive, deductive, transcendental, and existential fashion depending on the grist fed into the mill and the personality. This puts the heart and its functions squarely at the center of Christian certainty. Upon further reflection, I think this explains why your first point about the narrowly circular argument is correct, even though it is “not very persuasive to skeptics.” The argument is absolutely valid and sound, provided the conscience has said yes to the major and minor premises based on revelation, other supporting arguments (possibly), and the work of the Spirit. What I’m really saying, John, is that the cumulative case approach—properly understood—is really what’s under the hood of presuppositionalism. I would rather call it the cumulative conscience approach. As long as the presuppositionalist is willing to admit that the major and minor premises in the circular argument are not simply “basic beliefs” or presuppositions but may also be supported by other arguments along with the Spirit’s witness, there is no incompatibility. (You would, as I understand you, admit this.) In essence, I think presuppositionalism must give Newman’s illative sense its due, or it will always sound like vicious circularity. The bottom line is that the narrowly circular argument is more than just a circular argument because the premises, while they may be simply presupposed, may also be supported by more than a simple decision to presuppose them. There is, in fact, a complex reckoning of the conscience underneath this argument in addition to its logical merits. Would you agree?

I replied,

I agree with your comments on how the ideas of that book can be built out. I’m also very intrigued with your thoughts about it.

I too have often found that my mind solves problems during sleep.

On this, add to Newman Polanyi’s “tacit knowledge.” P says that whenever we go to solve a problem, we bring along all kinds of subconscious ideas. That knowledge functions in our investigations in many ways, suggesting hypotheses, directing our empirical analysis, and guiding our reasoning.

Hence, it is not always easy to see *why* we gain a conviction about something. To our conscious mind, conviction may be only a feeling (cognitive rest). But if we could see all the subconscious operations of the mind, we might see that we have, with God's help, formulated a cogent (and elegant!) argument.

Knowing, of course, is a human activity that was going on long before anyone dreamed of formulating an epistemology, or science of logic, or laws of thought. These sciences try to formulate some of the ways in which knowing goes wrong, and goes right. But we cannot assume that these sciences have analyzed the workings of the mind exhaustively. What goes on in the mind, as we see things and come to conclusions about them, is highly complex. Often the best thing epistemology can do is to speak of intuitions.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT WE KNOW?

This question carries epistemology to a higher level.

Jan. 4, 2012

Hi, J,

Well, my answer is that you just need to decide what knowledge is, what its criteria are. Then, when those criteria are met, you know that you know. Of course you need to have the right criteria, and in my view those are biblical-theistic. To be a little more specific, the criteria would be (1) agreement with divine revelation (normative), (2) agreement with the facts (situational), and (3) personal satisfaction (existential—"cognitive rest"). And of course each of these must be understood consistently with the other two.

That's *DKG*. Other stimulating Christian books on epistemology:

- Esther Meek, *Longing to Know*
- ———, *Loving to Know*
- Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*
- ———, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*
- Jay Wood, *Epistemology*

Hope some of these are helpful to you.

Best in 2012.

PERPLEXITY ON THE FAITH SIDE OF THE LINE

A friend sent me this very moving testimony.

Mar. 24, 2009

John,

I feel I should apologize to you before God for being a cause of stumbling. Not that I could make you stumble, but whatever doesn't gather with him scatters. I would like to tell you that I have made a decision to be perplexed from the "chair" of faith from now on, instead of the chair of skepticism, which is unbelief. I feel better already. Honestly. This could be a major turning point of my life. For all my Christian life I have oscillated between faith and unbelief. God says that such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord (James).

I am presently reading Numbers again. I am not identifying much with Moses but a lot with the Israelites—and I see how they ended up. I see that they are examples to us (1 Cor 10). As you said to me, there will always be more objections and so-called "problems" in the Bible. I think faith needs to be a decision. I have observed that you are a person who knows how to be perplexed on the faith side of the line in the sand. It makes all the difference, and that's what I want to do too.

I replied,

Dear A,

Remarkable statement, if I understand it right. I'd put it this way: perplexity is part of the Christian life, an awareness of the smallness of our understanding and the greatness of God's mystery. But yes, there is a huge difference between being perplexed as a believer and being perplexed as an unbeliever. In the former there is a faith commitment, what Van Til called a presupposition. So that our perplexity ends in worship. We are not on a precipice, thinking that the next argument may lead us to jump off. Of

course, there is always a bit of unbelief in the believer, so we can sometimes mistakenly get onto the precipice.

And yes, there is a choice, a decision to be made (given that the Spirit works that choice within us). As an unbeliever chooses to exchange God's truth for a lie (Rom 1), so by God's grace the believer chooses not to do that. So the will always influences the intellect, as well as vice versa. (Intellect, emotions, and will are a perspectival triad.)

So you've made a wonderful decision, or you've chosen to make that decision conscious, rather than merely subconscious. I have always understood your perplexities to be on the faith side of the line.

4. DOES GOD EXIST?

GOD'S EXISTENCE AND ATTRIBUTES

A fairly obscure issue, but one that interests some theologians and apologists, including my student correspondent.

Sept. 18, 1997

Dear Mr. H,

I don't have the Van Til book in front of me, but I assume what he is saying is that before we prove the existence of God we have to be clear on what kind of God we are arguing for. There are many "gods" being worshiped today: pantheistic, deistic, New Age, process, Mormon, etc. If one of those exists, the biblical God does not, and vice versa. Different arguments are required for each of these alternatives. So we can't just argue for the existence of some "god in general" and then later specify which one we are talking about.

You say that in Psalm 19:1–4, "Clearly unregenerate men are seeing only a supreme power or creator and not the attributes of God." I disagree. Nothing in the psalm limits the content of their perception in that sort of way. Indeed, the psalm is not focusing on the unregenerate at all. Romans 1 does focus on the unregenerate, and it says that to the unregenerate the creation reveals "the eternal power and deity" of God. Surely those are

attributes. Even your own formulation mentions attributes: power, creativity, and supremacy.

You say that if God's attributes are knowable from nature (or not knowable? Your writing is not clear at this point.) "this would make the man who has denied God's existence a 'fool' (Ps. 14:1)." I don't understand your point. Are you taking issue with Psalm 14:1 and saying that the atheist is *not* a fool? Well, I think that the unbeliever *is* confronted by God's attributes, and his suppression of this knowledge proves him to be a fool. I don't understand, either, how your reference to Romans 1 fits into your argument.

Justin Martyr's apologetics is subject to criticism on a number of counts, as we shall see later, so I will not bind myself to accept his views. But no matter how attenuated is his view of general revelation, certainly Justin believed there was in creation *some* knowledge of God. But *any* knowledge of God involves a knowledge of some divine attributes, some knowledge of "what" God is.

It simply is not possible to know "that" something exists without knowing (in however small degree) "what" it is. Knowing "that" without any knowledge of "what" would be to know a complete blank—that is, to know nothing.

I would say the same thing in response to your reference to Calvin.

And the Athenians, too, knew more than a bare "that." Romans 1 tells us that they did.

So, I would say that knowing "what" God is—to *some* extent—precedes any argument for his existence. That is a point about apologetic practice, rather than theoretical epistemology. In the latter area, I would say that there is no priority either way. We come to know the "that" and the "what" simultaneously. According to Romans 1, there is never a moment where anyone is actually ignorant of either.

Indeed, our conventional distinction between "existence" and "attribute" is a philosophical rather than biblical distinction, and it is not a distinction that should be taken very seriously. Why shouldn't we say that existence is one of God's attributes? Certainly it is a predicate of him, in an informal sense of "predicate." I know of Kant's argument on the other side,

of course, but I consider it tendentious. K wants to get rid of the ontological argument, so he draws a distinction of dubious value.

When something exists, in any case, it always has some attributes.

How do we “flesh this out” in evangelism? I’ll try to reply during the apologetics unit. In the meantime, you may want to read ahead in my books, *AGG* and *CVT*.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Focusing on the neglected concept of “cultural knowledge of God.”

June 20, 2012

C,

Well, of course there are different meanings to the phrase “know God.” It can refer to knowledge that God exists, it can refer to knowledge of God as an enemy (the knowledge Satan has), or it can refer to knowledge of God as our Lord and Savior. It can also refer to different sources of knowledge. There is the “natural knowledge of God” that Paul describes in Romans 1, the knowledge that comes from the Spirit.

I think also there is such a thing as a “cultural knowledge of God.” The Jews were and are regularly exposed to talk about God in their families and general society. The gentiles, however, were “without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). They worshiped an “unknown God” (Acts 17:23), and Paul agrees that they don’t have knowledge of the true God. I suspect that the same might be said of many who grew up under communism. They just never thought about God.

That doesn’t preclude that they know God in the Romans 1 sense. So you can approach them, I think, either as in Romans 1 or as in Acts 17. Of course, if you approach them in an Acts 17 way, don’t forget what Romans 1 says; and vice versa.

5. HOW SHALL I LIVE?

teleological ethics • deontological ethics • existential ethics • biblical theism

PERSPECTIVES IN ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

I have argued that epistemology is a subdivision of ethics, telling us what we “ought” to believe. My friend writes to ask how the perspective model of ethics (my DCL) correlates with the perspective model of epistemology (DKG). I reply,

July 4, 2009

Dear J,

Well, I think there is a perspectival relationship (surprise!) between ethics and epistemology. I’ve said in *DKG* that epistemology is an aspect of ethics, because epistemology deals with what we “ought” to believe. But I could also say the reverse: ethics is an aspect of epistemology, because it describes the knowledge of a particular sphere, the area of right and wrong, good and bad. And metaphysics is the third perspective. Ethics and epistemology each presuppose all the facts, and of course we can’t do metaphysics without knowing about knowing, and without knowing the values that knowing presupposes.

So: the normative perspective of ethics is to look at everything as what we ought to believe and do. The normative perspective of epistemology is what we ought to believe. These coincide.

The situational perspective of ethics is the world, considered as the facts to which ethical norms should be applied. The situational perspective of epistemology is the objects of knowledge, understood according to the laws of thought. These coincide.

The existential perspective of ethics is our inner knowledge and experience of right and wrong (conscience, etc.—*DCL*). The existential perspective of epistemology is the inner experience of gaining knowledge (terminating in cognitive rest). These coincide.

I’m not sure if I’ve discussed it just this way in any of my writings, but feel free to quote this note.

TEACHING ETHICS IN A SECULAR COUNTRY

My former student has an opportunity to teach ethics in a country that opposes Christianity. He would nevertheless like to show the weaknesses of

non-Christian ethical systems. I've made some earlier suggestions to him. Here he asks how my “perspectives” fit in:

How can I show the weakness of each system using a more perspectival approach? In other words, how does perspectives thinking interact with rational and empirical thinking, how does it differ, and at what points? Can you give some practical examples?

I reply,

Hi, T,

Well, I summarize the history of secular epistemology with the triad “rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism.”

1. Now, reason is a good gift of God, basically the ability to make inferences and to judge consistency. Perspectively, it focuses on the normative perspective, because it sets up rules that thinking must observe. These rules are the laws of logic, but ultimately God’s revelation.

Now, these rules are only part (“the normative aspect”) of human thinking. But they are also a perspective on the whole. That is, if you follow the rules of rationality correctly, they will lead you to all the truth that is available to human beings.

But non-Christian rationalism absolutizes human reason, denies its rooting in God’s rules, and therefore leads only to logical emptiness: logical consistency without empirical content.

2. Sense experience is another good gift of God. Perspectively, it focuses on the situational perspective, for it provides the content of thought, what we think about. Ultimately, sense experience is God’s revelation (what we call “general revelation”). So it is a perspective on all knowledge.

But non-Christian empiricism absolutizes sense experience and severs its connection with God’s revelation. That leads to reports of sensation without logical rules or constraints.

3. Subjectivity, our inner feelings and mental life, is another good gift of God, enabling us to bring together logic, sensation, and all other forms of God’s revelation. Our subjectivity is itself a revelation of God (self as the image of God). Ideally, our subjectivity integrates all sources of knowledge

so that we can know things with assurance. So our subjectivity is a perspective on all knowledge.

But non-Christian subjectivism (sophism, existentialism, postmodernism, etc.) absolutizes the inner life and severs it from the rules of logic and the constraints of experience, so that we cannot distinguish between knowledge and fantasy.

Non-Christian thought rightly sees that each perspective embraces the whole. That is what is persuasive about rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism. But non-Christian thought rejects the glue that holds the whole system together, so it falls apart.

Hope that helps.

ETHICS AS PARTS VS. PERSPECTIVES

My correspondent is trying to make a sharp distinction between “consequences” and “motives.” I think these can be distinguished in some ways, but in the end they should coincide in our thinking.

July 8, 2013

Dear K,

Thanks for your paper. As I promised, I did skim it, with some interest. But as I also said, I don't have time to give it a thorough review.

I'm glad to see you wrestling with the concepts of “consequence” and “motive.” I did that extensively in developing my model for *DCL*. I would think that giving that book some attention might be helpful to you.

As you may know, I develop a biblical model of ethical decision-making (following Van Til and the Reformed confessions) in three categories: goal, standard, and motive. Those tie in with some of the threefold distinctions elsewhere in my writings. The “standard,” of course, is the word of God in Scripture. The “goal” is the glory of God, and the “motive” is faith (but it could just as easily be love). So your “consequence” is my “goal,” and your “motive” is what I also call motive.

Now, there are different mentalities among theologians. One mentality is to divide concepts from one another very precisely and to warn against confusing one with another. That's typical of Reformed scholastic

dogmatics, e.g. The other mentality is to seek overlaps between concepts, to try to bring them together as much as possible, to show that they are mutually implicative, mutually defining, in some contexts interchangeable. That is Van Til's mentality (perhaps influenced by idealism) and also mine. You are, I might say, a "distinguisher," while I am an "integrator."

I don't think these methods are necessarily at odds with one another. At points they will compete; at other points they can learn from each other.

Which is to say in the present context that while you go to great lengths to precisely distinguish consequence from motive, I tend to conflate them, make them "perspectives" on one another. In my approach, to seek the glory of God as a consequence of our actions is to love him (and others) with all our heart and vice versa. That requires us, of course, to see both "glory of God" and "love" as complex realities that overlap at different points.

I know that there is much more to be said about this, but I honestly don't have time to carry on further conversation about it. You're certainly off to a good start. Your paper evidences a high caliber of thinking. I would expect it to develop into something helpful for the kingdom.

6. WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

a biblical doctrine of rights

RIGHTS AND DUTIES

Everybody talks about "rights," but what does Scripture say?

Nov. 13, 2010

Hi, J and S,

So far as I know, the paragraph on p. 16 is the only mention of "rights" in *DCL*, in the common meaning. In that paragraph I define rights as correlative to duties. If I have a right to X, then someone (perhaps myself) has an obligation or duty to provide X for me. After that, the book has a lot to say about duties, but nothing on rights. But my understanding of rights can at many points be deduced from what I say about duties.

I guess that reflects my conviction that there is too much discussion of rights today and too little discussion of duties, though rights are meaningless without duties. So I have tried to redress the balance a bit.

7. HOW CAN I BE SAVED?

biblical salvation

IS REGENERATION INSTANTANEOUS?

Of course, regeneration, the new birth, is an invisible work of the Spirit. But there are some reasons to describe it as instantaneous.

Dec. 1, 2011

Dear A and V,

The main argument for instantaneousness as I see it is the sheer antithesis between the old life and the new life. Seems to me that you have to be one or the other, not somehow both, or somehow in process from one to the other. We can't serve two masters, so if you quit serving Satan, at that point you're serving the Lord, no?

Other considerations: (1) The metaphor of new creation (2 Cor 4:6; 5:17)—parallel to creation *ex nihilo*. (2) The metaphor of death and new life (Eph 2:1–6): when resurrection happens, death is over.

Of course, as V stresses, we cannot see the work of the Spirit, so we cannot see when the old life ends and the new life begins. Externally, empirically, it could look very much like a process. Of course there are things that happen during the old life that turn people to consider Jesus, and there may be a long period of consideration before they make a heart commitment. And of course people can be nominal members of a church for ages and only at a late stage be really touched by grace.

Hope there's something helpful here.

IS CONVERSION GRADUAL OR SUDDEN?

Depends on your perspective. From God's side it is sudden; from ours, it may be gradual.

Nov. 14, 2011

Dear S,

Well, there are two questions here. (1) Theologically speaking, everyone is either regenerate or unregenerate. That is, each person is seeking either to bring all of life captive to Christ or to suppress his lordship in all of life. And yes, that does generate antithesis: the wisdom of the world vs. the wisdom of God.

(2) But there is also the question of process. Here a number of things can be discussed: (a) The many experiences people have in their unregenerate lives that bear fruit when the Holy Spirit regenerates. (b) The inconsistencies of the unregenerate person that lead him often in spite of himself to confess truths of God. These can be as minimal as “the sky is blue” or as significant as Satan’s knowledge of Jesus’ mission. (c) The uncertainty we always have in trying to identify somebody as regenerate or unregenerate. The distinction is absolute, but it’s not entirely visible to us, since we can’t read hearts. (d) The non-Christian’s employment of the truth for the very purpose of opposing it (Satan again—but also the Pharisees, et al.). (e) The very impossibility of suppressing the truth entirely while being surrounded by God’s revelation.

So yes, non-Christians can be impressed by our arguments. But we usually don’t understand entirely the significance of this.

The growth of children in Christian homes gradually to appreciate the gospel is, I’d say, a different thing: the outworking of the covenant, which often includes the outworking of infant regeneration (e.g., Luke 2:44).

REGENERATION, FAITH, CONVERSION

My student is applying to a mission board, and he wonders if the relationship between these three concepts might raise any theological red flags. I reply,

July 10, 2012

Well, there are always potential problems. But these three categories are biblical, and they do describe events simultaneous with conversion. So as long as you present them the way the Bible does, you should be home free.

I don't know what the board's doctrinal inclinations are. You might run into the problem of the relationship between regeneration and faith. In Reformed theology, regeneration is prior to faith, as its cause. Regeneration is a work of God (John 3), not something that we can choose to do. Faith is a choice, but regeneration motivates us to make that choice.

But some evangelicals like to say, "If you believe, you'll be born again," suggesting that our faith is the cause of regeneration.

That's not biblical. But it's true that faith and regeneration are simultaneous. So if you have faith, you are regenerate, and if you are regenerate you have faith. So if the "if" defines a mere logical condition, rather than a temporal predecessor, then it's true that "if you believe, you are born again."

Furthermore, 1 Peter 1:23 and James 1:18 speak of regeneration coming through the word of God, which suggests that believing the word leads to regeneration. So maybe there are two different concepts of regeneration operating in Scripture.

Since regeneration and faith are simultaneous, it may be that the relationship between them is not too big a deal. But people sometimes make a big deal of it.

WHY DOESN'T GOD SANCTIFY US IMMEDIATELY AFTER CONVERSION?

A student writes,

Jan. 27, 2010

This was brought up in conversation by my mom, and I had no idea how to answer her. If when we become Christians God sees us through the eyes of what Jesus did for us on the cross and how we will be sanctified in glory someday in heaven, then why do we have to wait until then to be sanctified? What is the reason for the time between when we become Christians and when we get to heaven? Of course God has many reasons to keep us on earth for a while before we pass away, but why are we not sanctified immediately while on earth?

I replied,

Good question, N. I don't have a good answer. But one could ask as easily, why didn't God send Christ to save us immediately after Adam sinned, and then raise the human race immediately to heaven? For some reason, God prefers to stretch things out in a historical sequence, to "tell a story," as people like to say today.

Given the structure of the story we're part of, more can be said. God leaves us (well, most of us!) on the earth for years after conversion, not primarily to provide us time to be sanctified, but to carry out the Great Commission, to bring the elect into the kingdom. During that time, God prefers to sanctify us, not as an instantaneous miracle, but by another "story," one of discipline and blessing by our heavenly father, dealing with one sin after another, through ups and downs. Another consideration: perhaps if we were perfect, if we never struggled with sin, we would be less effective witnesses to the lost. In any case, it shouldn't surprise us that our storytelling God creates stories within stories that way. But why God prefers that kind of historical process I don't know.

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Notes

Preface

- 1 Especially *AJCB*, *CVT*, *DKG*, *DWG*, *HWPT*, and *ST*. See also Vern Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), and Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1998).

Chapter 1: What Is Everything Made Of?

- 2 Metaphysics is the philosophical discipline that enquires about the nature of being itself, the basic structure of the universe.
- 3 The work of the sculptor is the “efficient” cause, the event that makes the statue what it is. So Aristotle identified four causes: efficient, formal, final, and material.
- 4 It must be unpredictable, for who could have predicted it? The predictor must have been a person, in effect a personal god. But these ancient Greeks had no place for personal gods. They were materialists. So they excluded the idea of prediction from the outset.
- 5 Aristotle’s “prime matter” is a metaphor too, in which he pictures the universe as sitting on a pile of undifferentiated stuff—prime matter—which is like nothing so much as Anaximander’s *apeiron*.
- 6 We should notice that, unlike astronomy, physics, and chemistry, philosophy doesn’t make real progress from one generation to another. Its language changes, and its arguments develop, but it wrestles with the same problems from age to age and comes up with answers that are much the same.

- 7 If there is no smallest piece, then there is no ultimate constituent of the world.
- 8 See an exposition of this verse in context, in chapter 4.
- 9 See *DKG*, *DWG*.

Chapter 3: Can I Know the World?

- 10 Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis*, Vol. 23, pp. 121–23 (1963).
- 11 G. E. Moore called the deduction of obligations from facts “the naturalistic fallacy.”
- 12 In *DG* and *ST*, I argue that authority, power, and love are God’s “lordship attributes,” the biblical definition of his status as lord. In that book, I use the names *authority*, *control*, and *covenant presence*. I also associate these attributes with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, respectively.

Chapter 4: Does God Exist?

- 13 And as Cornelius Van Til pointed out, irrationality is asserted on rationalistic grounds, because the irrationalist’s suppression of the truth is *willful*. So unbelieving thought is both rationalist and irrationalist at the same time. It bounces from one extreme to another. This bouncing is the pattern we observe in the history of philosophy: rationalist Parmenides provokes the irrationalist Sophists; rationalist Descartes provokes the irrationalist Hume, and so on. But irrationalism cannot exist without rationalist premises, and vice versa. This is why philosophy typically descends into incoherence.

Chapter 5: How Shall I Live?

- 14 So philosophers with empiricist epistemologies (epistemologies grounded in sense experience) are attracted to teleological ethics. Like the teleological ethicists, they believe that our knowledge of the world is simply a knowledge of facts.

15 I have paraphrased the commands, with a bit of interpretation and application. For fuller explanations, see my *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008).

16 In *DCL*, I argue that these three ethical principles reflect the “lordship attributes” I discussed in chapter 4: deontologism reflects his authority, teleologism his controlling power (since teleology focuses on the end goal, to which by God’s power all reality is moving), and existentialism his loving presence. Because of the coherence of these three principles, there need be no conflict in Christian ethics between “command ethics,” “narrative ethics,” and “virtue ethics,” or between the “goal,” “standard,” and “motive” triad emphasized by Cornelius Van Til.

Chapter 6: What Are My Rights?

17 This issue is, of course, related to the question of civil disobedience, revolution, passive resistance, and nonresistance. See my *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 618–621. See also the discussions of race (650–53) and racism (666–78).

Chapter 7: How Can I Be Saved?

18 His own doctrine of the fall was not orthodox, because it did not affirm the historic event described in Genesis 3. But he considered it obvious that we all do wrong.